

Runecald

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The Legacy

The monastery stood alone, its ancient stones weathered by time and war. Cracks ran like veins across its walls, and vines slithered through the openings, claiming what once belonged to faith. The wooden door, reinforced with rusting iron, swayed slightly in the howling wind. The scent of damp stone and old parchment filled the air, mixed with something more recent—blood.

Inside, kneeling in the dim light of flickering torches, was Temple Knight Zolkar. His silver armor, once a testament to his order, was now dented, bloodstained, and barely held together. His breath came in ragged gasps as he clutched a relic—a stone, smooth and old, with markings that pulsed with a faint, otherworldly glow. His gauntlet trembled as he ran his fingers over the etchings, whispering prayers to gods he feared would not answer.

Then came the first arrival.

A scurrying noise echoed through the empty halls. A shadow darted past broken pews, claws clicking against the cold stone floor. From behind a crumbled pillar, a ratfolk emerged, his beady black eyes glinting in the torchlight.

Tooth was his name. A warrior by nature, but not entirely without honor. He adjusted the small leather straps across his chest, his thin tail twitching.

"You summoned warriors," Tooth said, his voice carrying a hint of amusement. "I see none here."

Zolkar coughed, crimson staining his lips. "You are the first," he rasped. "More will come."

Tooth eyed the relic. "I don't trust things that glow," he muttered.

Zolkar smiled. "Trust is a luxury, rat."

The door creaked again, this time heavier, as a stout, wide-eyed figure stepped in. Dressed in ragged cloth with beads and trinkets hanging from his belt, Frold the Frog was as much a mystic as he was a warrior. He rubbed his damp, green fingers together, his throat pouch inflating slightly as he surveyed the scene.

"Cold place. Not fit for swamp folk," Frold croaked. His eyes landed on Tooth, then Zolkar. "Why am I here?"

Zolkar straightened, his pain momentarily ignored. "You are here because the monastery is dying, and with it, the order I serve. This stone—" he lifted the relic weakly, "—must live on."

Frold gave a slow blink, staring at the dim glow. "Magic," he muttered.

"Power," Zolkar corrected. "And a curse if it falls into the wrong hands."

A snicker echoed from the doorway, and a hunched figure slipped in. Uruk, a wiry goblin with mismatched armor, surveyed the room with gleeful mischief in his sharp black eyes.

"Knights are dying," he cackled. "Good time to loot."

Zolkar did not move, but his eyes locked onto Uruk's. "If you loot the dead, then you are nothing. But if you carry what the dead have left behind, you may yet be something."

Uruk squinted at the relic, scratching his chin. "Power, huh?" He grinned, revealing rows of jagged teeth. "I like power."

Zolkar sighed. "We shall see."

The last to arrive was Zuba, a lizardfolk draped in crude furs, his scaled fingers clutching a sword. His black eyes glowed faintly as he stepped forward, silent as a shadow.

"Death scent is strong here," he hissed.

Zolkar nodded, his strength waning. "A fitting place for my final hour."

Zuba studied the relic, then Zolkar. "You want us to take it."

Zolkar exhaled sharply, closing his eyes for a moment. "You are the only warriors I could find. This monastery—" he gestured weakly around them, "—will not stand much longer. This land is too dangerous. But the stone must be protected. You must carry it, and with it, the legacy of the Temple Knights."

The four figures exchanged looks. A rat, a frog, a goblin, and a lizard. Not knights, not heroes, but summoned by fate—or desperation.

"We are not knights," Zuba said.

Zolkar smiled weakly. "Neither was I, once."

A silence fell over the monastery, broken only by the wind rattling through broken stained-glass windows. Then, slowly, the group nodded.

"We will take it," Tooth said, eyes glimmering with intrigue.

"We will protect it," Frolde added, gripping his staff.

Uruk snorted. "We will see where it takes us."

Zuba said nothing, but stepped forward, holding out his clawed hand.

Zolkar, his last task completed, slumped forward. His breath rattled once more—then no more.

The flickering torchlight cast his shadow long against the cold stone floor.

Outside, beneath a skeletal tree, they dug a grave. The earth was damp, unwilling to let go of the dead, but they forced it open. They laid Zolkar down, his sword resting on his chest.

"A warrior deserves a warrior's rest," Frold muttered.

"A knight's grave for a knight," Tooth added.

Zuba placed a small stone at the head of the grave. "His fight is done."

Uruk, unusually quiet, took a step back. "So... what now?"

The four gathered in the broken monastery once more. The stone rested in Zuba's palm, pulsing faintly, its power a whisper at the edge of perception.

"It glows," Tooth muttered again.

"It calls," Frold said.

"It tempts," Uruk grinned.

"It waits," Zuba whispered.

They stared at the relic, the weight of destiny—or folly—settling on their shoulders.

"Where do we go?" Tooth finally asked.

Silence. They did not know yet. But they would.

They had to.

The wind howled through the ruined monastery, carrying whispers of a past that would soon be forgotten. The four figures stood in the crumbling hall, their gazes fixed on the stone cradled in Zuba's scaled palm. The dim glow pulsed steadily, a heartbeat of something ancient and unknown.

"We cannot stay here," Tooth muttered, breaking the silence. He ran a clawed hand over the worn leather straps of his belt, adjusting the sword at his waist. "The knight said this land is too dangerous. That means someone or something will come looking for this soon."

Frold, sitting on a broken pew, nodded solemnly. "We take it north," he croaked. His wide, black eyes flicked toward the shattered stained-glass windows. "Find safer place."

"Safer? Bah!" Uruk huffed, tightening his patchwork armor. "No place is safe if this thing has power. But north is as good as any."

Zuba turned the stone over in his hand, feeling the cool surface beneath his claws. "Then north we go," he said simply, slipping the relic into a small satchel at his side.

Before leaving, they scavenged what little they could from the dying monastery. The old storage chamber held dried meats wrapped in cloth, a few loaves of stale bread, and a pair of

wineskins filled with bitter red wine. Torch stubs lined the wall, and each took one, fastening them to their belts.

Tooth found an old leather satchel and slung it over his shoulder, stuffing it with the food. "Better than starving," he muttered.

Frold picked up a dented iron pot. "Boil water. Make food."

Uruk smiled, stuffing his pockets with whatever crumbs he could find. "And the wine is mine."

Zuba remained silent, his gaze lingering on the altar where Zolkar had once knelt. Then, without a word, he turned and led them out of the monastery.

The air was thick with damp earth and rotting leaves as they stepped into the treeline. Towering oaks stretched their gnarled branches above, the dense canopy swallowing what little light remained. The sound of rustling leaves and distant caws of unseen creatures echoed through the woods.

Tooth's ears twitched as he walked. "We still don't know what this thing is," he said, gesturing to the stone pouch at Zuba's side.

Frold exhaled, his throat pouch inflating slightly. "Magic. Strong magic."

"Magic does many things," Uruk said. "Could make you stronger. Could make you mad. Could make you dead."

Zuba walked ahead, barely looking back. "Knight said others look for it. Who?"

The group fell silent.

Tooth finally broke it. "A stone that glows? Could be wizards. Could be priests. Could be worse."

"Monsters," Frold croaked.

"Or kings," Uruk added. "Some would kill for power they don't understand."

Zuba said nothing, only gripping his sword tighter.

None of them had answers, but the question sat heavy in their minds. Who— or what— was searching for this relic?

Hours passed in quiet tension. The further they went, the darker the woods became. When the sky above them melted into hues of deep purple, they stopped in a small clearing near a stream.

"Rest," Zuba said simply, setting down his pack.



Tooth nodded. "A fire will keep things away."

Frold crouched near the water's edge, his webbed fingers trailing through the cold stream. He waited, unmoving, until—quick as a blink—he speared a wriggling fish with a sharpened stick. He held it up proudly. "Food."

"One fish?" Uruk scoffed. "We are four."

"Then catch your own," Frold said, tossing the fish onto a flat stone.

Tooth smiled. "I like him."

Zuba gathered dry twigs and bark, arranging them in a small pile. With practiced ease, he struck flint against steel, sending sparks into the tinder. Soon, a small fire crackled to life, casting shadows across their faces.

Uruk pulled a sword from his belt and began sharpening it against a rock. The others followed suit, checking blades, tightening straps, preparing for whatever came next.



As the fish cooked over the fire, the scent of smoke and charred meat filled the clearing. The night grew colder, but the warmth of the fire kept it at bay.

For a while, they ate in silence.

Then, Tooth spoke. "Wherever we take this stone, we need to be ready. Something is coming. I can feel it."

The others did not argue.

They all felt it, too.

The fire crackled gently as the party settled around it, the warmth fighting against the cool night air. The faint scent of smoke mixed with the earthy dampness of the forest. Stars peeked through the gaps in the trees, their distant glow swallowed by the shifting canopy.

Uruk, sharpening his sword with lazy strokes, glanced at the others with a smile. “So, we carry a stone of power,” he muttered, flicking a wood chip into the fire. “And no one knows what it does. No one but dead men.”

Frold, his wide yellow eyes reflecting the firelight, let out a low croak. “Magic. Old magic.”

Uruk chuckled. “Old magic, new magic—makes no difference. But I’ve heard a tale about the Temple Knights. A tale of a stone.”

Tooth’s ears perked up. “A tale or just goblin nonsense?”

Uruk grinned, flashing his jagged teeth. “Oh, it’s nonsense, alright. But all good legends start that way, don’t they?”

Zuba, as always, said nothing, merely watching the goblin with his unblinking golden eyes.

Uruk leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “They say the first Temple Knights—long before Zolkar, long before any of this—were not men at all.”

Frold’s throat pouch inflated slightly. “Not men?”

“Not men,” Uruk repeated. “They were spirits. Spirits of war and duty, bound to a great stone—a stone of power, much like ours. The stone chose warriors, called them, shaped them. Some say it gave them strength, made them immortal in battle. Others say it whispered to them, guiding them toward something...greater.”

Tooth frowned. “And what happened?”

Uruk’s grin widened. “What always happens? Greed.”

The fire popped as he continued. “One of their own—one who had fought beside them for years—was tempted. He wanted the stone’s power for himself. But the stone does not suffer the selfish. The spirits of the fallen knights rose from their graves and tore him apart, scattering his soul into the winds.”

The party was silent for a moment.

Then Frold croaked, “Good story. But just story.”

“Maybe,” Uruk mused, running a clawed finger over his blade. “Maybe not. But if the stone we carry is anything like the one from the legend, we best be careful.”

Tooth exhaled sharply. “Well, I’d rather it didn’t whisper to me.”

Zuba, who had been still the entire time, turned his gaze to the forest. “We are not alone.”

Before anyone could react, the underbrush exploded.

A guttural roar shattered the night's silence as three massive wild boars burst from the trees, their eyes glinting with fury. They were enormous, their bristled backs raised like jagged spikes, their curved tusks gleaming in the firelight.

The first boar charged straight at Uruk. The goblin yelped, rolling out of the way just in time as the beast trampled the spot where he had been sitting. His sword was in his hand in a flash.

The second rushed Tooth, its tusks swinging upward. The ratfolk twisted, barely avoiding the lethal strike, and slashed out with his sword, cutting a deep gash along the beast's flank. It squealed in rage but did not slow.

The third, larger than the others, locked eyes with Zuba. The lizardfolk stood firm, gripping his sword as the beast thundered toward him. At the last second, he sidestepped and drove the sword deep into its side. The boar screeched but swung its massive head, throwing Zuba to the ground.

Frold raised his staff and muttered a strange chant, his fingers glowing faintly. The second boar, wounded by Tooth, suddenly stumbled, as if its legs had been sapped of strength.

Uruk, now behind the first boar, leapt onto its back. He drove his sword into the thick hide, holding on as the beast thrashed violently, trying to shake him off.

Tooth, seeing the second boar stagger from Frold's magic, lunged forward, slicing at its exposed throat. Blood sprayed the ground as the creature collapsed, twitching once before going still.

Zuba rolled to his feet, wrenching his sword free from the third boar's side. With a powerful thrust, he drove the weapon straight through its heart. The beast shuddered and fell with a heavy thud.

The last remaining boar—Uruk's ride—screeched and bucked. The goblin, laughing wildly, held on before plunging his blade into its neck. The beast bucked one last time before collapsing beneath him.

The forest fell silent once more.

The fight was over.

Panting, Tooth wiped his sword clean. "Well. That was fun."

Frold poked one of the dead boars with his staff. "Food."

Zuba nodded. "Take the meat."

They cut the best pieces—thick legs and strips of hide—and roasted them over the fire, the smell of seared pork filling the clearing. They ate what they could and packed the rest in cloth, carrying their new rations for the journey ahead.

As the embers of the fire dimmed, one by one, they lay down to sleep, weapons close at hand.

The first light of dawn filtered through the trees, casting golden beams through the mist. The forest awoke with sound—birds chirping, unseen creatures rustling in the undergrowth, the soft trickle of the nearby stream. The air smelled fresh, damp with the scent of moss and soil.

Tooth stretched, yawning. “Still alive, then.”

Frold adjusted the leather strap across his chest. “For now.”

Uruk tossed a bone from last night’s meal into the bushes. “We keep going north, yes?”

Zuba stood, tightening the strap on his sword. “North.”

They gathered their things, extinguished the fire, and set off. The stone still rested in Zuba’s pouch, its glow faint in the morning light.

And somewhere, unseen, something was watching.

The forest slowly thinned as the party pressed forward, the towering trees giving way to rolling hills and scattered farmland. The air smelled of tilled soil and fresh grass, a stark contrast to the damp, shadowed woods they had left behind. As the sun reached its peak, they saw it—the city of Darthur.

Massive stone walls encircled Darthur, its towers standing tall like silent guardians. The city bustled with life; merchants hawked wares from wooden stalls, blacksmiths hammered steel, and the scent of roasting meat and fresh bread filled the streets. The clang of hooves against cobblestone and the shouts of traders mixed with the distant sound of temple bells.

Uruk sniffed the air. "Smells like money."

Tooth smiled. "Smells like we need rest."

Zuba led them through the gates, their worn cloaks blending with the crowds of travelers, merchants, and guards. Frold’s wide eyes darted about, taking in the sights of the grand city.

"We find tavern," Zuba said. "Eat. Sleep."

The others agreed.

The Resting Pike stood on a corner of the bustling marketplace, its wooden sign swaying slightly in the breeze. The scent of ale and roasted meat greeted them as they stepped inside. The tavern was lively—sailors swapping stories, gamblers laughing over dice, and a bard strumming a tune in the corner.

They found a table near the hearth and sat down. A red-haired barmaid approached, placing her hands on her hips. "What’ll it be?"

"Meat. Bread. Ale," Zuba said without hesitation.

"Make that four," Tooth added.

The barmaid nodded and disappeared, returning moments later with steaming plates of roasted pork, thick slices of bread, and mugs of dark ale. The party ate in silence, exhaustion catching up with them.

Uruk leaned back in his chair. "If we're looking for answers, an old city like this must have a library."

Frold wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Monastery not safe here. We need to find others."

Zuba took a deep drink from his ale and nodded. "We search library tomorrow."

With that, they finished their meal and retreated to their rented rooms, finally allowing sleep to claim them.

The next morning, the sun barely peeked over the rooftops as they set out through the winding streets. The Library of Darthur sat within an old stone building, its entrance guarded by towering pillars. The air inside smelled of dust and parchment, and the dim candlelight gave the place an almost sacred stillness.

Rows upon rows of ancient tomes and scrolls lined the wooden shelves. A few scholars sat hunched over books, whispering in hushed tones.

"We search old records," Zuba said. "Find other monasteries."

For hours, they combed through brittle pages, searching for any mention of the Temple Knights. Stacks of books piled up around them, but most contained only scraps of information—half-remembered tales, faded records, and cryptic references.

Then, Frold let out a small croak. "Found something."

The others gathered around as he placed the heavy tome on the table. Its leather cover was cracked with age, the title barely legible:

"The Sacred Orders: Faith and Steel Across the Lands."

Carefully, Frold turned the pages, revealing aged ink and faded illustrations. Finally, they found a section on the Temple Knights.

"The Order of the Temple Knights, sworn to protect the sacred relics of the gods, was once among the most revered orders in the land. Founded in an age long past, these warriors lived by strict oaths of duty, guarding the relics said to contain divine power. Among their greatest treasures was the 'Heartstone,' a relic of unknown origins, carried from monastery to monastery for centuries.



Though once spread across the lands, the Temple Knights suffered a great schism. Many were lost to war, their strongholds abandoned. The last known monastery to house the Heartstone stood high in the Blackfang Mountains—its fate, like the relic itself, remains unknown."*

Zuba traced a claw along the passage. "Blackfang Mountains."

Uruk flipped to the next page and grinned. "And here we have a map."

The faded parchment depicted an old monastery, nestled deep within the mountain range, days away from Darthur.

Tooth tapped the page. "If this is real, it's our best chance. If there's anything left of the Temple Knights, it's there."

They tore the map from the book and tucked it safely into Frolde's satchel.

"We leave at first light," Zuba said.

Back at the Resting Pike, the tavern was livelier than the night before. The party took their seats and ordered another round of food and ale.

"I don't like mountains," Uruk grumbled between bites of roasted lamb.

"Better than staying here," Tooth muttered. "If this city learns what we carry, we won't last long."

Frold nodded. "Temple Knights fell once. Maybe something made them fall."

Zuba set down his mug. "We find out."

As the night deepened, the party finished their meal and retired to their rooms, the weight of their next journey heavy upon them.

Dawn painted the sky in hues of pink and gold as they rode out of Darthur, their cloaks billowing in the crisp morning air. The Blackfang Mountains loomed in the distance, jagged peaks shrouded in mist.

The stone still glowed faintly in Zuba's pouch, guiding them toward whatever fate awaited in the mountains.

The road stretched before them, winding toward the Blackfang Mountains. The air grew colder as they neared, the scent of damp stone and pine filling their lungs. The towering peaks loomed ahead, jagged and treacherous, shrouded in swirling mist.

At the base of the mountain, they came upon a narrow trail that snaked its way upward. It was steep and uneven, carved into the rocky face long ago.

Uruk scowled. "I don't like climbing."

"Less talking. More moving," Zuba said, already leading the way.

The party ascended, their boots crunching against loose gravel. The wind howled through the crevices, whispering secrets only the mountains knew. They walked for nearly an hour before a hissing voice slithered through the air.

"Look what we have here, brotherssss. Meat."

The party froze.

From the rocks ahead, five serpentine creatures slithered forth. Their long, scaled bodies coiled over the stone, their faces disturbingly human. Cold, black eyes gleamed with malice. Their forked tongues flicked in and out, tasting the air.

"You walk a road that is not yours," one hissed.

"You are not welcome here," another sneered.

Tooth bared his own teeth. “We’re just passing through.”

The largest serpent reared back, laughing—a horrible, guttural sound. “You are going nowhere. Not unless you want to be our meal.”

Frold’s throat pouch swelled slightly. “Let us pass. No need for blood.”

The serpents only laughed harder. “There is always need for blood.”

And then they struck.

The largest serpent lunged straight for Zuba. The lizardfolk sidestepped quickly, swinging his sword in a sharp arc. The steel bit into its thick hide, drawing a screeching hiss of pain.

Tooth ducked low as another serpent whipped its tail at him, trying to coil around his legs. He slashed downward, cutting deep into the scaled flesh, forcing the creature to recoil.

Uruk grinned, dodging another strike. “Ugly faces, sharp teeth—I like this fight!” He feinted left, then drove his sword into the side of one serpent, twisting the blade before yanking it free. The creature let out a garbled scream, black blood dripping onto the stone.

Frold raised his blade, blocking a strike from the fourth serpent. It coiled around his arm, trying to pull him off balance, but with a guttural croak, Frold drove his sword straight through its face.

Zuba, now locked in combat with the largest of them, parried a strike and spun, bringing his blade down in a powerful, final blow. The steel sank deep into the serpent’s skull, splitting it open.

The remaining creatures hesitated—then tried to flee.

But Tooth was faster. He leapt onto the back of the nearest serpent, driving his sword down into its spine. It convulsed once before falling still.

The last remaining serpent slithered back, hissing curses. “Fools! You do not know what waits for you!”

Zuba lunged forward and silenced it with a single, precise slash.

The mountain pass was still once more, the cold wind carrying away the last dying breaths of the serpents.

Uruk wiped his blade on his cloak. “That was fun.”

Frold let out a deep breath. “Keep moving.”

They pressed on.

As they climbed higher, the path widened, leading them to ancient ruins nestled within the mountainside. Crumbled pillars jutted out of the earth, covered in vines and moss. Half-buried statues stood in silent reverence, their faces long eroded by time.

Tooth peered ahead. “We have to go through.”

The ruins stretched across the entire path, leaving them no choice but to enter. The air felt heavy here, thick with the weight of forgotten history.

As they stepped inside, the shadows shifted.

Something was watching them.

A low, guttural clicking echoed through the chamber. Then, six figures emerged from the darkness.

They were fish-like creatures, standing on two webbed feet, their slimy skin glistening in the dim light. Their tentacle-like appendages twitched, and each held a long, jagged spear.

Their black, lidless eyes stared unblinkingly.

The leader took a step forward, raising its spear. “Outsiderssss,” it gurgled in a voice thick with water. “This place iss ours.”

Uruk sighed. “Of course it is.”

Then the creatures attacked.

The fish-beasts charged, spears thrusting forward. Zuba dodged one strike, turning his blade upward and slashing across the creature’s chest. It howled, thick black blood spraying the floor.

Tooth ducked low, rolling beneath a spear thrust before sinking his sword into the creature’s side. He twisted the blade, pulling it free as the beast slumped to the ground.

Frold swung his sword wide, deflecting a spear strike and countering with a quick slash across the creature’s throat. It gurgled, collapsing into a twitching heap.

Uruk fought two at once, sidestepping a thrust and delivering a quick riposte, stabbing one in the gut. He yanked his blade free and whirled, slashing at the second. It barely dodged, letting out a wet snarl.

The last fish-creature let out a screech, raising its spear high, ready to throw—

But Zuba lunged forward, piercing its chest before it could strike.

The beast gurgled one last time before sinking to the ground.

Silence.

The party stood over the fallen creatures, catching their breath.

"What were they guarding?" Tooth wondered aloud.

Zuba looked ahead, deeper into the ruins.

Only one way to find out.

Monastery

The party pressed on through the rugged mountain path, the wind howling between the peaks. The journey took two days, their supplies dwindling as they ascended higher into the mountains. The nights were cold, and their small fires barely kept the frost at bay.



But as the sun dipped behind the jagged peaks on the second evening, they saw it—the monastery.

The structure stood solemnly against the mountain's edge, its stone walls weathered by time. Moss and ivy clung to the cracks, and parts of the outer walls had crumbled. Yet, despite the ruin, the monastery stood.

The heavy wooden doors creaked open as the party stepped inside. Seven monks knelt in prayer, their brown robes tattered with age. The sound of their hushed chants echoed through the vast, candle-lit chamber. As the party approached, one of the monks, an elderly man with a shaved head, turned and rose to his feet.

His deep black eyes examined them carefully. "Strangers. You walk into a sacred place. Why have you come?"

Zuba stepped forward. "Temple Knight Zolkar is dead."*****"He gave us a stone. He told us to protect it."

The room fell silent. The monks exchanged quick glances of astonishment before the elder monk spoke again, his voice trembling.

"You speak of a holy relic."

Tooth reached into Zuba's satchel and carefully lifted the stone for the monks to see. Its glow was faint, pulsing like a dying ember. The monks gasped in awe, their hands pressed together in reverence.

"It is real," one of them whispered.

The elder nodded solemnly. "The Temple Knights have long been lost to time. Yet, you carry their legacy." He gestured for them to follow. "Come. You are welcome here."

The monks led them deeper into the monastery. Despite the building's ruined exterior, the inner chambers were maintained with devotion. Simple wooden tables lined the dining hall, and the scent of baked bread and roasted vegetables filled the air.

As they ate, the elder monk, Brother Elric, spoke.

"This place was once a great sanctuary. The last true home of the Temple Knights." He folded his hands. "But time has not been kind. We have kept watch, but our numbers are few, and the walls have crumbled."

Frold swallowed a bite of bread. "Then we help."

The monks looked at each other before Elric nodded. "If you wish to serve, then serve by rebuilding what was lost."

The party exchanged glances and nodded in agreement.

Elric smiled. "Then your task begins. The monastery must be strong again if the Order is to rise."

The next morning, the party set to work. Their first task: repairing the outer walls.

The cold morning air bit at their skin as they ventured outside. The outer wall surrounding the monastery was half-collapsed, the stones worn and scattered. The monks showed them where to find stones suitable for rebuilding.

The work was exhausting. They hauled heavy stones from the mountainside, shaping them into blocks with chisels and hammers. The sound of steel striking stone echoed through the valley.

Uruk wiped sweat from his brow. "I preferred fighting monsters."

Tooth chuckled, lifting another stone into place. "At least walls don't try to stab us."

Frold grunted as he carved a stone block into shape. "Not yet."

Zuba remained silent, focused on his work.

By midday, a section of the outer wall had begun to take form. The sun hung high above them, and despite the fatigue, the party pressed on. The monastery's rebirth had begun.

The work began at dawn each day, and by dusk, the party collapsed onto their beds with aching muscles and dust-covered hands. Restoring the monastery was no small task.

With guidance from the monks, they started by mixing mortar, the binding agent that would hold the stones together. Sand was gathered from the riverbed nearby, carried in heavy sacks back to the monastery. Water was fetched in large wooden buckets, splashing over the edges as they walked. Ash from old fire pits and crushed coal were mixed in, strengthening the mortar. The thick, grayish paste was stirred in a large stone trough, the scent of damp minerals filling the air.

"Stronger than clay," Zuba muttered as he ran his clawed hand through the mixture.

"And lasts longer," Frold added.

Uruk wiped his forehead, smearing dust across his green skin. "That's nice and all, but I miss fighting monsters."

Tooth grinned, "This is the kind of fight we need to win."

With the mortar ready, they began rebuilding the eastern side of the outer wall.

The eastern wall had collapsed in several places, leaving gaps where time and weather had eroded the stone. Each block had to be chiseled into proper shape. They used iron hammers and chisels, cutting rough stones into flat surfaces. Zuba and Frold hauled the stones into place while Uruk and Tooth carefully layered mortar between them. When a block fit well, they pressed it into the wet mortar, sealing it.

Day after day, the eastern wall grew stronger, rising block by block. By the fifth day, the foundation was reinforced. By the eighth day, the gaps were filled. By the tenth day, the eastern wall stood whole again.

The western side of the main monastery building had deep cracks, the stone crumbling in places. They could not leave it like that—rain and wind would eventually bring it down.

The task was tedious but necessary: Using chisels, they scraped out the old, weakened mortar from the cracks. They packed fresh mortar into the gaps, smoothing it carefully. Tooth climbed onto wooden scaffolding to reach higher sections, repairing the ceiling cracks that let cold air seep in at night. Zuba and Frolde replaced entire sections where the stone had eroded beyond repair.

This work took another five days.

The south wall had collapsed the most—mere rubble remained in places. This was the hardest part. They needed fresh stone.

They took pickaxes to the mountainside, splitting stone slabs from the rocky ground.

Each block was chiseled into shape in the monastery yard. Monks helped carry them inside, stacking them into place. Mortar was spread thickly, holding the new blocks firm.

"Feels good to build something," Uruk admitted one evening, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Good to build something that lasts," Frolde corrected.

By the end of two weeks, the monastery stood strong again.

By now, the party had settled into the living quarters of the monastery.

Their rooms were simple—sturdy wooden beds, a table, a chair, and a chest for belongings. Warm blankets kept them comfortable at night. Torches burned along the halls, casting flickering light in the evenings.

The cold mountain air no longer seeped through cracks.

Each afternoon, they gathered in the monastery's great hall for a shared meal.

A long wooden table stretched across the room, where the monks and the party sat together. Bowls of stew, bread, and fresh water were served.

Before they ate, Brother Elric led a short prayer, thanking the gods and honoring Temple Knight Zolkar, who had given them this mission.

The first time, Tooth was silent. The second time, he mumbled the words. By the end of two weeks, they all said the prayer together.

"The walls are strong again," Zuba said one evening.

"But not finished," Frolde added, chewing on bread. "Still work inside."

"Tomorrow we start on the temple doors," Brother Elric said. "They must be restored before winter."

Uruk groaned. "More hammering?"

Tooth smiled. "We could be fighting monsters instead."

Frold croaked. "This work builds warriors, too."

"Warriors need strength," Zuba said, finishing his meal. "We keep building."

The two weeks of work transformed the ruins into something strong again. The walls were whole, the cracks sealed, and the monastery's heart was beating once more.

The stone they carried still pulsed softly, but now, it rested in a place that could protect it.

The monastery had been restored, its walls standing strong once more, but the work was far from finished.

One morning, as the sun cast its first golden rays over the mountain peaks, Brother Elric approached the party in the courtyard. The old monk stood tall, his black eyes calm but piercing. His hands, though weathered by time, held the grip of his sword with effortless control.

"You have rebuilt these walls," he said, surveying them. "But stone alone does not make a stronghold."

The party exchanged glances.

"A warrior's true fortification," Elric continued, "is his body, his mind, and his discipline. Here, we do not simply guard relics. We fight. You have taken the first step. Now it is time for the next."

Uruk rubbed his jaw. "So, what? You're going to teach us how to meditate?"

Elric's face remained neutral. "No. We are going to teach you how to fight."

Before Uruk could smile, Elric moved.

In a flash, he struck.

Uruk's feet left the ground as the monk twisted his body and sent him flying onto his back with a single strike. The goblin groaned, blinking up at the sky.

"Lesson one," Elric said. "Expect no mercy."

The days of hauling stone and mortar had strengthened their bodies, but this was a new level of intensity. Combat training began at sunrise and ended at nightfall. Weapon drills, hand-to-hand combat, and stamina exercises filled their days. They sparred against each other, against monks, against Elric himself. Every strike was met with a counter. Every stance had a weakness to be exposed. The monks fought with precision and fluidity—no wasted movements, no hesitation.

At first, it was humiliating. Elric disarmed them within seconds, knocked them down, outmaneuvered every attack.

Tooth lunged too fast, and Elric twisted his arm behind his back before sending him tumbling. Frolld swung wide, but a monk grabbed his shield, flipping him onto the hard stone. Zuba moved to counter a strike, only for Elric to step inside his guard and deliver a devastating kick to his chest. Uruk had it the worst—for every taunt he made, he got thrown twice as hard.

The only rule was simple. No surrender. Get up and try again.

One day, Elric presented Frolld with a spear and shield.

"You are a guardian by nature," he said. "A wall that must hold. Use these, and learn to make your enemy break before you do."

The spear was finely crafted, its wood smooth yet sturdy, the tip razor-sharp. The shield was heavy but balanced, carved with the sigil of the old Temple Knights.

At first, Frolld fumbled. The shield slowed him, the spear was longer than he was used to, and Elric punished every mistake.

"The shield is not a burden," the old monk said after Frolld collapsed from another strike. "It is a weapon of its own. Use it."

Frolld adapted. He learned to block, deflect, and redirect. He used the shield's weight to throw opponents off balance. He mastered quick thrusts and controlled strikes with the spear. By the end of the second month, he was no longer a student—he was a fighter.

Pain was constant. They ran up and down the mountain trails, carrying heavy stones. They sparred with wooden weapons until their bodies were covered in bruises. They were thrown, beaten, disarmed, and forced to keep going.

Uruk groaned after another brutal fall. "Are we training to be monks or training to die?"

Tooth, panting, smiled. "Both, I think."

Frolld, rubbing his sore arms, simply said, "We get stronger."

And they did. Zuba became fast and precise, his strikes deadly and controlled. Tooth learned to read his opponent's movements before they even struck. Uruk stopped taunting and started winning. Frolld stood like a wall, unmoving, unshakable. Even the monks began to acknowledge them.



While the others honed their sword skills, Zuba was called aside.

One night, Elric brought him to the monastery's inner sanctum. The room was lined with old tomes, the air thick with the scent of parchment and candle wax.

"You will learn more than the blade," Elric told him. "You have the gift of magic. It must be sharpened like any other weapon."

Zuba spent hours reading through old scrolls and texts, learning the ancient techniques of the warrior monks.

Among them was the art of forming a fireball. He learned to focus energy in his palm, molding raw heat into a sphere of flame. At first, he burned his own hands. The flames sputtered, died, flared uncontrollably. But over time, he mastered it. The fire became an extension of his will, a controlled force.

Healing magic required another level of concentration. He had to channel life energy, mend wounds, restore strength. The first time he tried, nothing happened. The second time, he healed a shallow cut. After weeks of practice, he could close deeper wounds, ease pain, and even cure exhaustion.

He also learned how to direct damaging spells—bolts of energy, waves of concussive force, spells designed to break armor, knock enemies aside. He tested them in combat training, blasting opponents back, staggering them with magical force.

Elric watched him closely. "You must balance strength with restraint. Magic is not just destruction—it is control."

Zuba listened, learned, and adapted.

Time passed quickly. Muscles hardened. Strikes became sharper. Their movements, once clumsy, became precise. They sparred against the monks—and began to win. Elric no longer held back—but they could hold their ground against him.

One evening, after training, they sat around the large table, their hands still aching from the day's drills.

Uruk exhaled. "I never thought I'd say this, but... I think we're actually getting good at this."

Frold nodded. "Stronger. Faster."

Tooth smiled. "And still alive."

Zuba clenched his fist, watching the flicker of flame dance in his palm. "Not just alive." He looked up at them. "We are ready."

Elric, standing by the doorway, smiled faintly. "Perhaps."

The fire in Zuba's palm burned brighter.

They had become warriors.

The cold wind drifted through the halls of the monastery as the monks gathered in the great chamber, their voices solemn and low. The flickering candlelight cast shifting shadows on the ancient stone walls as the head monks led the party through their next lesson.

The prayers of the Temple Knights were not merely words but a code of existence, a binding contract between the warrior and the path they walked.

Brother Elric stood at the altar, hands clasped before him, his voice carrying through the chamber.

"The blade is sharp, but the will must be sharper.
The flesh may bleed, but the spirit must not break.
Steel in hand, fire in soul, death before disgrace.
This is the path of the warrior. This is the way of the Temple Knights."

The monks repeated the words in unison, and the party, standing among them, followed suit.

Another monk, an elder with a scarred face and a voice like grinding stone, took up the next verse.

"Blood is the ink that writes our vows.
Stone is the shield that holds our house.
Honor is the light that leads our way.
Through war and ruin, through fire and shadow,
We remain unbroken."

The final prayer was the most sacred, a vow spoken by every Temple Knight before battle. The monks knelt in formation, and Elric signaled for the party to do the same.

"By blade and by flame,
By wisdom and by war,
I stand unshaken before the storm.
To falter is death,
To kneel is ruin,
To rise is honor,
And honor shall be my shield."

The words sank into the party like hammer strikes against steel. Tooth, standing with his fur shimmering in the dim light, whispered the words to himself, feeling the weight of them settle in his chest. He was not a priest, nor a scholar, but something about these prayers—these oaths—felt real.

When the final echoes of the chant faded into the monastery's stone walls, Elric stepped forward. His gaze settled on Tooth, sharp and knowing.

"You have trained. You have rebuilt. You have spoken the words of warriors. But no knight is made in words alone."

Tooth met his gaze, ears twitching slightly. "What must we do?"

Elric gestured toward the northern peaks, where the jagged mountaintops disappeared into the clouds.

"There is an old ruin in the mountains. It was once a sanctuary of the Order, but time has buried its name. Inside, there lies an ancient sword, forged by the first of our kind. Retrieve it, and you will have proven yourselves worthy."



Uruk huffed. "Let me guess. It won't just be sitting there waiting for us?"

Elric's lips curled into a faint smile. "Nothing worth wielding ever is."

Zuba placed a clawed hand over the satchel where the stone rested. "Then we go."

Frold adjusted his shield. "To walk the path is to face the trials."

Tooth nodded. The words of the prayer still burned in his mind as he repeated them under his breath.

"By blade and by flame... by wisdom and by war..."

The monks bowed their heads as the party gathered their weapons, fastened their cloaks, and prepared for the journey ahead.

With the wind howling behind them, they stepped out of the monastery and into the cold mountain air.

The trail north was treacherous, a winding path through sharp cliffs and loose rock. The cold bit at their exposed skin, and their breath misted in the crisp mountain air.

They walked in silence for the first hour, the only sounds the crunch of boots against gravel and the distant cry of some unseen creature in the peaks above.

Uruk, always the first to break a silence, sighed. "So... we're retrieving a magic sword now. Does that mean we finally get to do something fun?"

Tooth, his eyes scanning the path ahead, smiled. "You call being thrown around by monks for months fun?"

Uruk grinned. "Getting beat up and getting a magic sword are two very different things."

Frold spoke without looking up. "We do not seek the sword for power. We seek it to prove we are ready."

Uruk snorted. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I want to be 'ready' too. I just also like swords."

Zuba remained silent, his golden eyes watching the distant ruins, which now loomed ahead.

By midday, the jagged outline of an ancient fortress became visible through the mist.

Broken stone archways and collapsed walls marked the remains of what had once been a proud sanctuary. The wind howled through the skeletal remains of the structure, whispering through the cracks like the ghosts of those who once walked these halls.

Tooth took a deep breath, his fur ruffling in the mountain air. "This is it."

Zuba's fingers hovered over his sword. "Something waits inside."

Frold tightened his grip on his shield. "Then we walk forward."

With their weapons ready and the trial before them, the party stepped into the ruins.

The ruins were silent, save for the wind whistling through broken archways. Crumbled walls and shattered stone tiles stretched around them as they moved deeper into the abandoned stronghold. Every step echoed eerily, as if something unseen lurked in the shadows, listening.

Tooth's tail flicked as he scanned the ruins with a wary eye. "Feels too quiet."

Zuba nodded, gripping his sword. "Not for long."

Minutes passed as they weaved through the remains of old corridors, their path lined with statues so worn by time that their faces had been reduced to smooth, featureless shapes. Then, ahead of them, the stone floor abruptly ended in a descending stairway.

The passage below yawned open like a gaping mouth. Darkness pooled at the bottom, untouched by the weak light filtering in from above.

Uruk pulled a torch from his pack, striking flint against steel. A spark flared, and the torch roared to life, its orange glow stretching the shadows. He smiled. "I bet we're the first ones down here in centuries."

Tooth exhaled sharply. "Somehow, that's not making me feel better."

Without another word, they began their descent.

The stairs twisted downward into a long stone tunnel. The walls were damp, streaked with centuries of condensation. Their footsteps disturbed the thick dust coating the floor, their presence sending tiny clouds of it swirling in the flickering light.

At the far end, the tunnel opened into a vast chamber lined with thick stone pillars. The ceiling stretched high above them, lost in shadow.

Tooth was the first to step forward. The moment his boot pressed against the stone, there was a faint click.

Before he could react, a pressure plate sunk beneath his foot.

A sharp whistle cut through the air.

Thwack!

An arrow, fast as a lightning strike, slammed into his shield. The force sent a shudder up his arm.

Tooth's eyes widened. "Holy shit, that was close!"

Frold stepped forward cautiously, his spear at the ready. "Traps. Old, but still deadly."

Uruk whistled as he inspected the arrow embedded in the shield. "They really wanted to keep something out."

Zuba pointed ahead. "Or keep something in."

Carefully, they moved forward, avoiding the pressure plates they now noticed scattered across the floor.

The room ahead awaited them in perfect stillness.

Then, the stillness shattered.

The dust on the floor swirled unnaturally. The room filled with a deep, dry creaking, like old bones grinding together.

One by one, bony hands burst from the ground.

With an unnatural clatter, eight skeletons rose from the dirt and stone, their ancient armor rattling as they pulled themselves up. Rusted swords gleamed dully in their grip, and in the darkness of their hollow skulls, small flames flickered, burning with eerie blue light.

Uruk unsheathed his sword, grinning. “Now this is more like it.”

Before anyone could respond, the skeletons charged.

The first came straight for Zuba, its rusted blade swinging in a brutal downward arc. Zuba sidestepped, twisted, and slashed his own sword upward, severing its skull from its shoulders. The bones collapsed into a heap, but the others did not falter.

Tooth met two skeletons head-on. One lunged low, aiming for his legs, while the other swung high. He dropped to a crouch, dodging the first strike, and slammed his sword into the ribcage of the second. Bones cracked under the impact, and he yanked his blade free just in time to parry the second skeleton’s attack.

Frold raised his shield, blocking a flurry of strikes from another skeletal warrior. His opponent struck with unnatural speed, but Frold held firm. He waited, feeling the rhythm of its swings. When an opening came, he drove his spear forward, piercing through its chest and pinning it to a pillar. With a final thrust, he shattered the skull.

Uruk darted around a pair of skeletons, slashing at their joints, breaking knees and elbows before delivering a killing blow. He let out a laugh, dodging a swipe that nearly took his head. “Gotta be faster than that, bones!”

The last skeleton, its blue eyes burning brighter, let out a horrid, raspy wail. The flame in its skull swelled, and its entire form suddenly moved with unnatural speed.

It lunged at Zuba.

For a moment, it seemed faster than he could react—then, Zuba raised his hand and whispered a word of power. The air shimmered around him, and suddenly, the skeleton halted mid-strike, as if some invisible force held it back.

Zuba's free hand clenched into a fist. The flames in the skeleton’s skull flickered wildly. Then, with a sudden burst of energy, the fire in its eyes extinguished, and its bones collapsed lifelessly to the floor.

Silence returned to the chamber, broken only by their panting breaths.

Uruk sheathed his sword and kicked one of the fallen skulls. “Not bad.”

Frold exhaled. “Something still guards this place.”

Zuba nodded. “We keep moving.”

At the far end of the room, an old wooden chest sat partially buried beneath rubble.

Tooth knelt, brushing away dust and debris. With a quick flick of his blade, he pried open the lid. Inside, a pile of old silver coins glimmered faintly in the torchlight. He picked up a handful, letting them clink between his fingers.

“About a hundred and fifty silver.” He smiled. “Guess these guys won’t be needing it anymore.”

Uruk grabbed a few coins and slipped them into his pouch. “Better in our hands than theirs.”

Frold and Zuba divided the rest among them before turning toward the dark tunnel to the right.

It stretched forward into the unknown, the flickering torchlight barely reaching beyond the entrance.

Zuba took the lead, sword at the ready.

Without hesitation, the party stepped into the darkness once more.

The tunnel twisted and narrowed as they moved deeper, the weight of the mountain pressing in around them. The damp air smelled of mildew and something more pungent—something rotten. Their footsteps echoed in the suffocating silence, the flickering light of Uruk’s torch barely illuminating the way ahead.

Then the tunnel widened, spilling into a cavernous chamber. The air was thick, humid, and heavy with the scent of decay. The stone walls were slick, coated in a strange, shimmering slime that pulsed faintly in the dim light.

Tooth sniffed the air and grimaced. “Something’s wrong.”

Before he could say another word, the shadows above them shifted.

A horrible screech split the air as four creatures dropped from the ceiling, their hooked talons gleaming. They were horrid, twisted things—birds with the heads of eagles, their beaks jagged and cracked, their wings misshapen, their hooked claws curved like cruel blades. Their glowing red eyes locked onto the party with pure hatred.

Then, from the oozing floor, something else stirred.

The slimes crawled forth, their gelatinous bodies shifting and rippling, revealing rows of needle-sharp teeth. Their amorphous forms squelched as they moved, spitting acid onto the stone where they slithered.

The air erupted into chaos.

The first hook-handed bird dove at Zuba, its monstrous claws slashing downward. Zuba twisted out of the way, but the second bird was faster—its hooked talon raked across his chest, slicing through his cloak and drawing blood. He gritted his teeth and threw up a hand, chanting a burning incantation.

A fireball erupted from his palm.

The explosion engulfed two of the creatures, sending them screeching through the air, their feathers bursting into flame. The cavern flashed red and orange, casting jagged shadows on the walls. The burned creatures thrashed violently before crumpling into smoking heaps.

A sloor slime launched itself at Frolde, wrapping around his leg. He let out a strangled croak of pain as razor-like teeth dug into his flesh, tearing away chunks of skin. He slammed his shield down on the creature again and again, its slimy body splitting apart with each strike until it finally stopped moving.

Uruk was not as lucky.

A second slime latched onto his leg, its teeth sinking in deep. He let out a pained snarl and stabbed wildly, hacking at the creature as it tried to drag him to the ground. His leg poured blood, but he kept fighting.

Tooth barely had time to react before one of the hookbirds swooped down, its massive talons smashing into his side. The impact sent him hurtling into the cavern wall, his skull cracking against stone.

For a moment, the world spun. His vision blurred.

Darkness threatened to take him.

The screeching of the birds, the wet gurgle of the slimes, the clash of steel—it all faded into a distant roar in his ears.

Then something primal snapped inside him.

With a guttural snarl, Tooth leaped from the ground, his eyes black with fury.

One of the remaining hookbirds lunged forward, its beak wide to strike.

Tooth did not dodge.

Instead, he jumped straight into its throat.

His jaws locked down with savage force, his fangs tearing into its windpipe.

The creature let out a horrific, wet gurgle as blood poured from its throat. It thrashed wildly, smashing itself against the cavern wall in a desperate attempt to throw him off. But Tooth held on, biting deeper, twisting his head, ripping the flesh apart.

With a final, horrific shudder, the hookbird collapsed into the dirt, its throat a ruined, bleeding mess.

The last of the creatures fell soon after—Frolde's spear piercing a slime through the core, Uruk driving his sword into the last bird's skull.

The cavern fell silent, save for the heavy panting of the party.

Blood pooled around their feet.

Uruk gripped his wounded leg, wincing. "Next time, let's fight something without teeth, huh?"

Tooth wiped the blood from his muzzle, his chest rising and falling with deep, steady breaths. "No such luck."

Zuba, still bleeding from his wounds, stepped forward. "We keep moving."

There was no time to rest.

They turned toward the next tunnel, the darkness waiting for them.

The next chamber was smaller, tighter. The walls closed in, making every sound twice as loud. Stalactites dripped water onto the stone floor, filling the room with the slow, steady sound of falling droplets.

Then came the skittering.

Dozens of tiny claws scraped against the floor and walls.

A series of guttural, high-pitched growls filled the chamber as the shadows shifted.

From the darkness, they came.

Six small, twisted creatures scurried toward them, their bodies the size of bear cubs, covered in thick, dark fur. Their faces, however, were wrong—bat-like muzzles filled with tiny, needle-sharp teeth, and large, leathery ears that twitched erratically. Their eyes gleamed red, and their gaping mouths dripped with thick saliva.

The first of the creatures lunged at Uruk, its fangs snapping. He barely raised his sword in time, deflecting the bite, but another creature grabbed onto his leg, its claws sinking into his already wounded flesh.

Zuba raised his hands, channeling a spell. A burst of flame ignited in his palm, but before he could release it, one of the beasts leaped onto his back, clawing wildly at his shoulders.

Frold spun, smashing one of the creatures with his shield, sending it tumbling across the chamber. He followed up with a hard stab, piercing its thick hide.

Tooth, still half-dazed from his earlier wound, drove his blade deep into one of the beast's chests. The creature let out a horrid screech, but even as it died, the others pressed on, their eyes filled with mindless hunger.

The battle raged on, the chamber filled with screams and the clash of steel.

The ruins had not yet finished testing them.

The last of the bat-faced creatures let out a horrid, gurgling shriek before Frold drove his spear through its thick hide, pinning it to the stone floor. It twitched, its red eyes flickering dimly, before it fell silent. The cavern was now littered with the bodies of beasts, their blood pooling in thick, steaming puddles against the cold ground.

Panting, Uruk wiped his blade clean on his tattered cloak, wincing at the pain still pulsing through his wounded leg. Tooth rolled his shoulder, still sore from being smashed into the wall earlier. Zuba exhaled, lowering his burned hands, the last remnants of a flame spell fading from his fingertips.

They had to press on.

The tunnel ahead stretched forward like a black, gaping throat. With weapons in hand, they stepped into the darkness once more, their bodies aching, their minds focused.

Then, from the end of the tunnel, a sound echoed toward them.

A low, dark moan.

The kind of sound that crawled into a man's bones, something unnatural, something wrong.

Then the screeching began.

A storm of wings and a stench of rot burst forth from the darkness.

Out of the shadows came five harpies, their ghastly, naked bodies swooping toward them, their grotesque faces twisted into hungry snarls. Their sagging breasts hung like empty sacks of flesh, their bony hands ending in jagged claws that gleamed in the flickering light. Their wings flapped violently, sending dust and debris swirling through the air.

The party barely had time to react before the creatures were upon them.

One of the harpies let out a piercing, ear-shattering screech, making Uruk stumble back, clutching his ears. The next moment, a harpy swooped down at Frold, its talons slashing viciously across his face. A spray of hot blood splattered against the stone wall, running down his cheek in crimson rivers.

Frold roared in pain, thrusting his spear wildly at the creature, but it twisted mid-air, dodging the strike with unnatural agility.

Another harpy grabbed Tooth from behind, its jagged claws locking around his arms. Before he could slash at it, the creature lifted him from the ground, its wings beating wildly as it flew up and then suddenly flung him against the cavern wall.

His back slammed into the stone with bone-cracking force, his breath leaving him in a sharp gasp.

As he struggled to rise, he let out a furious snarl.

"Have they sent us to die out here?!"

Zuba barely managed to parry as a harpy dove straight at him, its claws raking against his armor, tearing through leather and fabric. The thing let out a wet, guttural screech, its foul breath washing over his face. He shoved his hand up, his palm erupting with flame, and blasted the creature point-blank in the chest.

The fire burst across its flesh, its screams twisting into inhuman wails as it spiraled out of control, crashing into the rocky floor.

Uruk swung his sword wildly, catching a harpy across its thin ribcage. It shrieked and recoiled, but before he could finish it, another harpy swooped from behind, its claws locking onto his head like a vice.

Its talons squeezed, harder, harder—

A horrific crunch filled the chamber as blood burst from Uruk's scalp. He let out a strangled howl of agony, his vision blurring as the harpy screeched in pleasure.

Frold, despite the pain in his wounded face, lunged forward and drove his spear straight through the creature's back. It let out a choked cry, its grip loosening from Uruk's head before it collapsed in a twitching heap.

Armor ripped and tore, claws sank into flesh, and the air was thick with blood and screams.

With a final desperate slash, Tooth ripped a harpy's throat out, sending it spiraling into the dirt, gasping in silence. Zuba, his hands still burning with magic, unleashed another burst of flame, engulfing the last harpy in searing fire.

The battle ended in silence.

The harpies lay twitching, bleeding, their grotesque bodies charred and broken. The only sound was the panting breath of the party.

Uruk stumbled, blood streaming from his head, his face pale.

Frold wiped the blood from his eye, his jaw clenched.

Tooth spat onto the stone, his fangs bared. "If this sword isn't worth it, I'm going to kill something."

But there was no time to rest.

Before they could even steady themselves, another horror lurched forth.

A sickly wet squelching sound echoed from the far side of the chamber.

From the darkness came six figures, shambling forward with unnatural movements.

They were stitched-together abominations, their bodies crafted from sewn flesh, their limbs mismatched, their skin a patchwork of different creatures fused together with crude, jagged

stitches. Their faces were a twisted mess—mouths sewn shut, extra eyes placed where they shouldn't be, torsos heaving as if filled with writhing things beneath.

They did not scream. They did not hesitate.

They attacked.

Frold raised his shield just as one lunged, its clawed hands smashing into the wood with inhuman force. The impact sent him skidding backward, his boots scraping across the stone.

Zuba raised his hands, trying to summon fire, but before he could, one of the creatures grabbed his arm, twisting it backward at an unnatural angle. The pain was blinding, white-hot agony as he barely managed to kick the thing off before it tore his arm from its socket.

Tooth, despite his injuries, sprinted low, dodging the grasping claws of two of the beasts. He leapt onto one's back, driving his blade deep into the base of its stitched skull. It shuddered violently, but it did not die. Instead, it lurched backward, smashing him into the ground.

Uruk, half-blinded from blood loss, swung wildly, his sword sinking deep into the stomach of one of the creatures. It barely reacted, instead grabbing him by the throat and slamming him against the cavern wall.

They were fighting on the edge of exhaustion, their bodies barely holding together.

The clash of metal and flesh filled the tunnels.

Tooth, his vision fading, snarled through gritted teeth. "We need to end this. Now."

Zuba, breath ragged, forced himself to focus.

With the last of his strength, he chanted the words of fire.

A roaring burst of flame exploded outward, engulfing three of the creatures, burning away their foul, stitched flesh. The remaining horrors staggered, their patchwork bodies melting in the fire.

With their final reserves of strength, the party fought, slashed, burned, and bled.

The last of the fleshborn horrors let out a sickening, gurgling moan before collapsing into a steaming heap of broken bodies.

The cavern fell into silence once more.

Breathing heavily, blood dripping from their wounds, they stood—barely.

Tooth wiped a hand across his mouth, his ears flicking at the tunnel ahead.

No time to rest.

The sword was still waiting.

The tunnel twisted downward, the air growing thick with the stench of unwashed fur, rotting meat, and filth. Their wounds ached, their bodies screamed for rest, but their mission was not yet complete.

As they pressed on, the tunnel opened into a massive underground chamber.

In the center, half-buried in a slab of rock, stood the sword. Its hilt was wrapped in worn leather, the crossguard was simple but sturdy, and the blade shimmered faintly despite the lack of light. The tip of the weapon was embedded deep in stone, as if placed there by some unseen force.

But the sword was not unguarded.

Dozens of makeshift tents and piles of filth surrounded the weapon. Gnolls—filthy, towering hyena-men—lived here. Some feasted on bones, gnawing on the marrow with slobbering hunger. Others slept against the walls, their ragged armor clinking as they shifted. A few sat sharpening their rusted blades, their guttural chuckles echoing in the chamber.

The stench of blood and sweat hung heavy in the air.

The party huddled in the shadows of the tunnel.

Zuba placed his hands over each of them, his magic working through their exhausted bodies, closing wounds, restoring strength. The warmth of the healing spell pulsed through them, easing the worst of the pain. But nothing could restore what was drained from them in battle.

They rested in silence, gathering their strength. Their breaths were slow, their bodies still, their eyes locked on the pack of gnolls.

Then, after what felt like an eternity, they nodded to each other.

No words needed to be spoken.

It was time to finish this.

The first strike was swift and silent.

Tooth moved like a shadow, slashing the throat of a gnoll before it could even yelp. The beast's eyes bulged, its clawed hands clutching at the fountain of blood spilling from its neck before it slumped to the floor.

Then, all hell broke loose.

A thunderous howl erupted from the pack.

The gnolls leapt to their feet, grabbing weapons, snarling and screeching in rage.

Frold blocked the first strike with his shield as a gnoll brought down a jagged cleaver with brutal force. The impact rattled through his arm, but he held firm and drove his spear

forward, piercing through its ribcage. The gnoll let out a wet, gurgling laugh before collapsing into a heap.

Uruk was everywhere at once. He ducked, weaved, and slashed, slicing tendons, opening throats, sending gnolls howling to the ground. One lunged at him with a rusted pike, but he side-stepped and drove his blade into its belly, twisting viciously.

Tooth was a blur of motion, his sword flashing in the dim light, cutting through muscle and bone. But then, from the side, a massive club swung toward him.

Crack.

The impact sent his vision spinning, pain exploding in his skull. His jaw snapped sideways, and with a sickening realization, he felt one of his teeth splinter inside his mouth.

Blood filled his mouth as he staggered back, snarling through the pain.

Across the chamber, Zuba fought like a cornered beast.

His sword clashed against three gnolls at once, his magic flickering at his fingertips as exhaustion gnawed at him. He managed to sear one's face with fire, but another gnoll smashed the blunt end of a spear into his stomach.

He gasped, collapsing to the floor.

The world blurred. His breath came shallow. His limbs wouldn't move.

He could hear the roars, the clashes of steel, the gnoll laughter echoing in his mind like a death song.

Was this it?

His fingers dug into the stone floor. Not yet.

With everything he had left, he forced himself to crawl.

A gnoll loomed over him, raising its rusted sword.

Tooth leapt onto its back, his fangs digging into its neck. The gnoll shrieked, flailing, trying to throw him off, but Tooth held on, sinking his blade into its spine until it collapsed beneath him.

The fight raged on, brutal and desperate.

Armor tore.

Blood spattered the ground.

Screams echoed through the tunnels.

But one by one, the gnolls fell.

Until only silence remained.

Panting, bleeding, barely standing, the party staggered toward the sword.

Zuba, still crawling, gritted his teeth and forced himself to stand. His fingers curled around the hilt.

The stone was cold, unmoving.

With one final, shuddering breath, he pulled.

At first, nothing happened.

Then—a crack, deep within the earth.

The stone split apart. The sword slid free, as if accepting its new master.

The moment it left the stone, a faint blue glow hummed across its surface.

Then, Zuba collapsed.

The rest of the party followed, crumbling to the ground in sheer exhaustion.

Sleep took them.

When they woke, it felt as if an entire day had passed. Their bodies still ached, but the worst of their wounds had closed. The sword rested in Zuba's hands, cold as a piece of metal.

Without a word, they rose and left the ruins, carrying their prize.

The journey back to the monastery was a blur, exhaustion hanging over them like a thick fog. The moment they stepped through the monastery gates, Brother Elric was waiting.

He examined them, then looked at the sword. "You have done well."

Taking the weapon, Elric led them into the sacred chamber. At the center of the room, a stone altar sat, carved with old sigils.

Elric placed the sword on the altar.

Then, turning to Zuba, he extended his hand. "The stone."

Zuba pulled the sacred relic from his satchel.

The moment it touched the altar, magic erupted.



Golden light spun and twisted around the blade, flowing like liquid fire. The runes on the altar blazed to life, filling the chamber with a divine hum. The sword absorbed the power, its glow intensifying until the entire room was bathed in its light.

Then, the magic settled.

The sword had changed.

Elric lifted it carefully, its holy glow pulsing gently.

Turning, he handed the blade to another monk, a warrior of the order.

He looked at the party. "Now you understand. The stone you carry does not simply hold power—it bestows it. It is a gift of the gods, an artifact that can transform steel into something greater."

He nodded solemnly. "You have proven yourselves. And now, your journey truly begins."

The party remained at the monastery for several days, resting, eating, and recovering from their wounds. Their bodies still ached from the brutal trials in the ruins, but the worst of the pain had faded.

Tooth, despite his cracked tooth, chewed on hard bread with defiance, refusing to let the injury slow him down. His rat-like nature made him instinctively hoard bits of food from meals, tucking away extra pieces of bread or dried meat into his pack.

Frold spent his time soaking in the monastery's cold water basin, his frog-like skin requiring moisture to stay comfortable. He would sit in the stone basin for hours, croaking softly to himself as the others walked by. "Cold water... strong spirit," he would mutter, puffing his throat pouch.

Zuba, being a lizardfolk, found warmth wherever he could, curling up near the hearth or basking in any spot of sunlight that streamed through the high monastery windows. He often sat motionless for long stretches, eyes half-lidded, which made Uruk poke him repeatedly to make sure he wasn't actually asleep.

Uruk, in contrast, spent most of his time teasing the monks, complaining about the lack of ale, and challenging anyone he could to arm-wrestling matches.

Each morning, the party joined the monks in prayer and training, reciting the ancient vows and sparring against the newer recruits. The temple halls echoed with the clang of steel and the murmured words of warrior hymns.

After a few days, Brother Elric summoned them to the great hall.

The elder monk, standing tall before the restored altar, looked upon them with approval. "You have rebuilt our monastery, you have proven your strength, and you have retrieved the sacred blade. But strength alone is not enough. The Order must grow. The world beyond these walls is in chaos, and there are many lost souls who seek purpose."

Zuba nodded. "You wish us to find new warriors."

Elric inclined his head. "Go to Darthur. Seek those who would walk this path. Find those willing to fight for something greater than themselves."

Tooth flicked his tail. "So... we preach in the streets now?"

Frold let out a slow croak. "Not just preach. Find the worthy."

Elric handed them a simple wooden medallion, engraved with the Order's insignia. "Show this to those who ask. Those who truly seek the path will follow you back here. Choose wisely."

With that, the party set off once more, heading for the city of Darthur.

After several days of travel, they arrived in Darthur, the bustling city streets teeming with merchants, travelers, and common folk. The towering stone buildings cast long shadows over the cobbled roads, and the air was thick with the scent of baking bread, roasting meat, and unwashed bodies.

Finding an open plaza near the marketplace, the party began their task.

Zuba, standing tall and motionless like a statue, let his deep, resonant voice carry over the crowd. "The world is filled with war and ruin. We offer purpose, strength, and a cause worth fighting for."

Frold, sitting cross-legged beside him, began chanting a low, rhythmic warrior's prayer, drawing curious onlookers with the strange, guttural sound.

Tooth, always quick with words, wove stories of the Order's past victories, emphasizing their power and discipline. "We rebuild the Order of the Temple Knights. We train in steel and faith. If you seek honor, if you seek strength, you will not find it in drunken brawls or empty coin-purses. You will find it with us!"

Uruk, despite his usual skepticism, actually enjoyed the theatrics. He clanged his sword against his shield, shouting, "We take the weak and make them strong! We take the lost and make them legends!"

A small crowd gathered.

Some scoffed and moved on, but others—**young men and women, warriors without direction, mercenaries seeking something more—**stayed. They listened, drawn to the fire in the words, to the presence of these hardened fighters who had clearly seen battle.

One young man, barely out of his teenage years, stepped forward. "You really teach warriors? Train them like monks?"

Frold nodded solemnly. "Train hard. Fight hard. Live strong."

A woman with a scar across her jaw crossed her arms. "I've fought for gold, but gold fades. You promise something greater?"

Tooth met her gaze. "We promise a purpose. A way to be more than a sword for hire."

Over the next few days, more came. Eight recruits—eager, rough around the edges, but willing.

When they felt they had gathered those who truly sought the path, they rested in the tavern for a few nights, regaining their strength before the journey back.

The road back to the monastery was slower, the recruits asking endless questions.

"Do we get swords like yours?"

"How long does training last?"

"Are the monks always so serious?"

Tooth, with his usual sharp tongue, simply smiled. "You'll find out soon enough."

After several days of travel, they arrived at the monastery gates, leading the recruits inside. The sight of the ancient stone walls and the disciplined monks left the newcomers wide-eyed and silent.

Elric met them in the great hall, his gaze sharp as he examined the recruits. "You have done well."

The recruits were immediately tested in combat.

The monks watched as they sparred, gauging their skill, their dedication. Some were sloppy, driven by passion but lacking refinement. Others showed raw talent, but needed discipline.

They were also taught the first prayers of the Order.

They learned the oaths of warriors, the rites of honor, the chants of battle. Though awkward at first, they soon recited the words with conviction.

In between training, they helped with chores in the monastery—bringing water, chopping wood, cooking meals, washing clothes, cleaning floors, making candles, rewriting old texts, gathering herbs in the mountains.

At the end of the week, Elric gathered the party once more in the great hall.

"The Order grows, thanks to you," he said, his voice calm but filled with strength. "This place was once a ruin, and now it is a stronghold once more. But there is more work to be done. More trials ahead. The world is changing, and we must be ready."

The party stood, knowing that this was only the beginning.

The wind was crisp and cool as the party ascended higher into the Blackfang Mountains, the air growing thinner with every step. The monastery shrank in the distance, its stone walls now only a speck among the jagged peaks. Clouds drifted lazily through the valleys below, casting moving shadows over the rocky slopes. The scent of pine and damp earth filled their lungs, mingling with the distant call of mountain hawks gliding through the sky.

Brother Elric had given them a task—not of battle, but of patience and skill. The monks of the Order did not rely on steel alone; they also understood the ways of nature. Healing, endurance, and even magic could be drawn from the earth if one knew where to look. They were sent to gather seven sacred herbs, each with its own unique properties, and bring them back for processing into potions, teas, and remedies.

The journey took them through steep cliffs and narrow trails, where loose stones threatened to slip beneath their boots. Patches of green clung stubbornly to the mountainside, hidden in cracks where the wind could not steal their roots. Frold, with his natural affinity for the wild, led the way, his large, round eyes scanning the landscape carefully.

He knelt beside a cluster of blue-tinted leaves growing in the shadow of a boulder. “This one—Windstem. Grows only in high places, close to the sky. Crushed leaves give strength to the lungs.” He carefully cut a few stems with his knife, placing them into a cloth satchel.

Tooth sniffed the air and pointed to a thorny bush with small white flowers. “What about that one?”

Frold examined it and nodded. “Frostbloom. Good for fever. Boiled petals can cool burning skin, stop shaking.”

Zuba, silent as ever, reached down and ran his clawed fingers over the petals of a dark purple flower nestled in a crack between two slabs of stone. He plucked one carefully, turning it in his hand. “This one smells of ink.”

Frold’s throat pouch puffed slightly as he considered it. “That is Nightroot. Rare. Crushed into powder, it restores magic to the weary.”

They continued, gathering what they could. Bloodmoss, a deep red creeping plant that, when chewed, could slow the loss of blood from wounds. Ironleaf, a thick, silver-veined plant that toughened the body when brewed into tea. Ghostcap, a pale mushroom that thrived in the darkest cracks of the mountain, known for dulling pain when dried and mixed with honey. And finally, Emberfrond, a fiery-orange herb that, when burned, released a scent that could ward off fatigue and clear the mind.

As they gathered, the air was filled with the sound of distant rockfalls, the occasional rustling of unseen creatures, and the sharp, cutting whistle of the mountain wind. The hours stretched long, their satchels growing heavier with each harvested plant.

By nightfall, they returned to the monastery, arms full of herbs and bodies sore from the climb. The monks led them into the herbarium, a chamber deep within the monastery where ancient wooden tables were lined with stone mortars, clay pots, and rows of drying racks. The scent of aged parchment, dried flowers, and old medicine filled the air.

For weeks, the party worked under the monks’ instruction, learning the art of herb preservation and potion making. Each herb had to be treated differently, some dried in the sun, others ground into powder, and a few boiled to extract their most potent properties.

Windstem leaves were hung upside down in bundles, drying in the cool air before being crushed and stored in small clay jars. Once dried, the monks instructed them to mix a pinch of Windstem with honey and warm water to create a tonic that strengthened the lungs. The old books described its use in ancient times when warriors climbed great peaks in preparation for battle.

Frostbloom petals were gently plucked and placed into deep wooden bowls, submerged in cold spring water. The monks taught them to add a few drops of goat’s milk to the mixture, which helped extract the cooling oils from the petals. Once strained, the liquid became a soothing remedy for fevers and inflamed wounds.



Nightroot was the most delicate to prepare. The monks carefully peeled the outer layers, revealing a glistening purple sap that had to be mixed with powdered silver dust before being left to sit in moonlight for three nights. The instructions in the monastery's ancient book warned: *"A careless hand dulls the power. Measure with patience, or the magic will not answer."*

Bloodmoss was dried in sheets, then ground into fine powder and mixed with boiled beeswax to create a paste that could be applied directly to wounds. One monk, his hands steady with experience, showed them how warriors of old had carried small pouches of Bloodmoss into battle to staunch bleeding in the heat of combat.

Ironleaf had to be boiled in a broth of dried bone and garlic, then left to simmer for a full day. The resulting mixture had a bitter taste but was said to fortify the body and make the bones less likely to break.

Ghostcap mushrooms were sliced into thin strips and set over smoldering coals. The monks taught them to grind the dried pieces into powder and mix it with thick honey, creating a numbing paste for pain relief.

Emberfrond was burned slowly over special incense stones, its smoke inhaled deeply to sharpen the mind. The texts spoke of warrior monks who had used it before battle to push through exhaustion and fight with renewed clarity.

Throughout the weeks of work, the party found themselves drawn into the meticulous care required for this craft. Tooth, despite his usual impatience, found himself testing different teas, mixing herbs together just to see how they tasted. Frold, ever the quiet observer, watched the drying herbs sway in the wind, croaking softly as he memorized their scents. Zuba, ever disciplined, spent long nights reading through the monastery's books, learning the ritual of mixing Nightroot with magical essence.

Uruk, of course, complained. "If I wanted to stir pots and measure leaves, I'd have been a cook." But even he had to admit that a stronger body and a sharper blade meant nothing if they had no way to mend themselves.

When the weeks came to an end, the monastery was stocked with medicinal herbs, teas, and potions. Small stone pots filled with healing pastes lined the shelves, clay vials of energizing tonics sat beside them, and bundles of dried herbs were ready to be brewed. The party now knew not only how to fight—but how to heal, how to endure, how to outlast their foes.

Brother Elric, inspecting their work, gave a slow nod of approval. "You are learning the ways of the warrior monk," he said, placing a firm hand on Zuba's shoulder. "Strength is nothing without wisdom. A blade is only as powerful as the one who wields it—and a warrior who cannot heal is already half-dead."

The party, standing in the dim light of the herbarium, surrounded by the fruits of their labor, knew that this knowledge would serve them in battles yet to come.

The monastery was built on more than stone and swordplay. It was an archive of wisdom, a place where the past was preserved so that the future could learn from it. For centuries, the monks had collected knowledge, recording the great deeds of warriors, the lives of kings, the ways of battle, and the prayers that bound their Order together. But time had worn down these ancient texts—parchments crumbling, ink fading, knowledge threatening to be lost forever.

Brother Elric had another task for the party. "You have restored the walls. You have strengthened your bodies. Now, you will strengthen the mind. The Order's history must not be forgotten."

For months, they would become scribes.

They were led into the monastery's library, a vast chamber where rows of shelves reached toward the arched ceiling, filled with dust-covered tomes and brittle scrolls. The scent of aged parchment, ink, and melted wax lingered in the cool air. Long wooden tables stretched across the room, each bearing stacks of ancient texts waiting to be rewritten.

The monks taught them the delicate art of scribing. They were given quills, ink pots, and fresh parchment. Their task was to copy the words exactly as they were, ensuring that no knowledge was lost.

As they sifted through the oldest books, they uncovered the forgotten words of the past:

Chronicles of the Eternal City - "The city of Darthur, built upon the backs of kings and conquerors, has stood for centuries, its walls tempered by both time and war. From the reign of King Maldric the First, whose sword split the heathens of the north, to King Oswen the Wise, who ruled not with steel but with gold, the city has remained unbroken. Yet history teaches that no kingdom stands forever—stone may outlast men, but greed outlasts both."

The Codex of Steel and Spirit - "The Order of the Temple Knights follows the path of steel and spirit. A warrior who wields his blade without discipline is no better than a beast. A monk who prays without action is no better than a beggar. We train so that our strikes are precise, our spirits are unyielding, and our bodies endure what lesser men cannot."

The Mountain and the Blade - "To fight is not to kill—it is to survive. The mountain stands against the wind, not to challenge it, but to endure it. The warrior stands against his enemy, not for glory, but for the path."

The Tide and the Warrior's Heart - "Beware the sins of the weak-hearted. Fear makes cowards of men. Rage makes fools of them. A warrior must know when to act, when to hold, and when to fall like the tide, for even the sea wears down the strongest of stones."

The Threefold Path of Mastery - "The blade is nothing without the hand that wields it. The hand is nothing without the will that commands it. The will is nothing without the honor that guides it."

The Black Hand: Judgment and Mercy - "The Black Hand, symbol of our Order, marks those who carry the weight of war and wisdom alike. It is the hand that defends, the hand that strikes, the hand that protects the weak, and the hand that buries the fallen. It is both mercy and judgment."

Each day, they sat hunched over wooden tables, their quills scratching against parchment as they carefully copied the words of history. The ink stained their fingers, the candlelight flickered, and the smell of parchment filled their lungs.

Tooth, whose quick hands were more accustomed to stealing purses than writing prayers, grumbled under his breath as he dipped his quill into the ink. "This is worse than getting my teeth knocked out."

Uruk, who had never been patient with detail, smeared a page with ink after spilling an entire pot. He cursed loudly, earning a disapproving glance from a monk. "If I wanted to do this much writing, I'd have been a damn merchant."



Frold, however, took to the work with calm discipline, his strokes careful and precise. His frog-like fingers proved surprisingly steady, and he spent long hours etching small illustrations in the margins—diagrams of swords, monks in prayer, battle formations, and old kings.

Zuba remained silent and diligent, his clawed hand moving steadily across the parchment. His training in magic had taught him the importance of focus, and the patience needed to copy a single passage for hours without mistake.

At times, their ink would run low, forcing them to venture to the monastery's workroom to craft more. The process required certain herbs they had gathered in the mountains—Nightroot to deepen the blackness, Emberfrond to keep the ink from fading over time. The monks taught them to grind the herbs into powder, mix them with oil, and boil them in a clay pot over a slow fire. The scent was strong, earthy, and sharp, filling the library as fresh ink was poured into stone pots.

Other nights, they worked by candlelight, but the monastery's candles were dwindling. They were taught how to make new ones, gathering tallow from goat fat, melting it over a low flame, and pouring it into molds. The smell was thick and greasy, but the result was sturdy candles that burned long into the night.

For months, they worked like this.

The days blurred into nights, the nights into weeks. The library slowly transformed, its shelves filling with newly rewritten books, their covers fresh and unmarked by time.

In the monastery, their days followed a strict rhythm. They wore cloaks over their regular armor, the emblem of the sword and black hand sewn into the fabric. The heavy cloth swung over their shoulders as they walked the halls, marking them as members of the Order.

When it was time for meals, the bells rang through the monastery.

They gathered in the main hall, where long wooden tables were lined with bread, stew, and water drawn from the mountain springs. The monks said a short prayer before eating, reciting the words:

"Strength in spirit, steel in hand, wisdom in heart. May we be worthy of the path."

At night, they returned to their chambers, their bodies sore from sitting, their eyes aching from reading. But as they lay in their simple beds, they understood why this work was as important as any battle.

The world would forget them someday. But the words they wrote would remain.

The morning sun cast golden light over the Blackfang Mountains as the party gathered their tools at the monastery gate. The task for the day was not one of battle or scripture—it was labor. The Order needed more beds, and the party had been chosen to cut down trees, shape them into proper boards, and build sturdy wooden frames for the sleeping chambers.

The monastery's existing beds were ancient—some little more than creaking planks covered with thin, worn linen. Brother Elric had given them a simple instruction: "A warrior must rest well to fight well."

Armed with axes, saws, and ropes, they made their way toward the dense pine forests of the lower mountain slopes. The sound of chirping birds and the rustling of unseen creatures filled the air, mixing with the occasional whisper of wind through the trees.

Zuba picked the first tree, running a clawed hand over its rough bark. "This one is strong."

Tooth wiped his brow. "Chopping trees instead of chopping heads. Feels strange."

Uruk grinned. "If I can break it, I like it." He swung his axe with a heavy thud, biting deep into the wood.

The work was slow at first—the thick trunks resisted their strikes—but soon, the rhythm of swinging axes, cracking wood, and heavy breathing filled the air. The trees groaned as they fell, branches snapping as they hit the ground.

Once felled, the trees were cut into manageable sections, stripped of their bark, and sawed into planks. It was brutal, back-breaking work. Sweat mixed with sawdust, their cloaks growing heavy with dirt.

Frold, despite his smaller frame, was methodical. "Chop here, not there," he instructed, showing Uruk where to strike to split the logs efficiently.

Zuba, ever focused, shaped the rough planks into smoother boards, chipping away at knots and imperfections.

Tooth, though grumbling about the heat, tied the logs together with thick ropes and helped drag them back up the winding trails toward the monastery.

By nightfall, they had hauled enough wood back to the monastery's courtyard.

Over the next few days, the party transformed the raw wood into sturdy bed frames.

The monks taught them woodworking techniques, guiding their hands as they carved and fitted the pieces together.

They sawed planks into precise lengths, sanded down the rough edges, and hammered wooden pegs to hold the frames in place. The sound of hammers and saws echoed through the halls of the monastery.

Uruk, after accidentally splitting a board in half, scowled. "Who knew beds were harder to fight than beasts?"

Tooth smiled, wiping wood shavings off his cloak. "Maybe we should've brought swords."

Frold worked in silence, occasionally croaking in thought as he stitched together the final reinforcements.

By the end of the week, twenty new wooden beds stood neatly in the sleeping chambers, strong enough to support even the heaviest warrior.

The next task was making mattresses.

For this, they descended into the lower valleys, where wild hay grew thick along the riverbanks. Armed with scythes and sacks, they waded into the golden fields, cutting and bundling the dry grass into large heaps.

Frold, moving gracefully through the knee-high grass, inspected the stalks. "Dry, but strong. Good for comfort."

Tooth sneezed violently, shaking his head. "This stuff is cursed. It gets in my fur."

Uruk chuckled, stuffing a handful into a bag. "Better than sleeping on cold stone."

Back at the monastery, they sewed large linen sacks, stuffing them with the hay until they were full and firm but soft enough to sleep on. Each was tied shut and placed atop the wooden frames.

At last, the new beds were complete.

Brother Elric inspected the work, running his hand over the smooth wooden frames. He nodded approvingly. "You have built more than beds. You have built rest. A warrior who does not sleep will never stand in battle."

With their task complete, the party thought they would have a moment to relax.

But another task awaited them.

Elric gathered them in the great hall. "The Order is known for strength, but also for mercy. It is time we offer aid to those who seek it."

The monks had prepared herbal remedies, healing potions, and restorative teas made from the mountain herbs the party had gathered weeks before. Their task was to travel to Darthur and offer these services to the sick and wounded.

The party packed vials, dried herbs, and stone jars filled with medicinal pastes and set off toward the city.

Darthur, ever bustling, was filled with the usual haggling merchants, beggars, and noblemen wrapped in silks. Finding a place to set up, they stood near the city square and announced their cause.

Zuba, his deep voice unwavering, called out, "The mountain springs of the Temple Knights hold healing waters. Our monks have brewed remedies for the weary and the ill. Come forth if you seek aid."

Frold prepared small samples of Ghostcap tea, pouring it into wooden cups for those who suffered from pain and fatigue. A hunched old man, his hands trembling, drank a cup and sighed in relief.

Tooth, surprisingly persuasive, found himself surrounded by curious townsfolk. "I'll tell you this: you won't find better cures than what we brought. Stomach pains? Fever? Wounds that won't close? We have it all."

Uruk was less diplomatic, smacking a sickly-looking man on the back. "You don't look like you'll last another winter. Better drink what we got before you turn into a corpse."

Over the next few days, word spread. The party stayed at the tavern, talking to the people, telling stories of the monastery, and spreading the teachings of the Order. They found themselves treated with respect, their reputation growing.

After a week, they left Darthur and returned to the monastery.

It wasn't long before people began arriving.

Some came limping, their bodies battered from battle or hard labor. Others sought relief from disease or exhaustion. Mothers brought sick children, desperate for cures.

The monks welcomed them all.

In the halls of the monastery, healing prayers were whispered, potions were administered, and wounded hands were mended.

Brother Elric, watching the growing number of visitors, turned to the party. "Because of you, the Order is remembered not just as warriors, but as healers. This is a great victory."

The party, having built beds, healed the sick, and strengthened the Order's presence in the city, realized they were no longer just wanderers.

They had become something more.

Each month, beneath the watchful eye of the mountain peaks, the party made their way to Darthur, their presence becoming a familiar sight among the stone streets. The journey, though long, was one of purpose—seeking new disciples willing to embrace the way of the monastery. In half a year, sixteen more souls had taken the solemn path, swelling the ranks of their once-lonely halls.

With the influx of new recruits, the monastery bustled with life. The days were long but well-structured, each monk finding their place within the sacred walls. Some trained with wooden swords in the courtyard, their battle cries ringing against the stone. Others sat in the quiet chambers, grinding herbs and mixing tinctures, their fingers stained with the scent of basil, valerian, and rue. The steady glow of candlelight flickered in the scriptorium, where disciples bent over parchment, quills scratching as they copied old texts and restored the wisdom of the past.

The halls smelled of wax, parchment, and woodsmoke. Helms and shields were polished, prayers were whispered in the early hours, and even the most hardened of warriors found solace in the quiet rituals of meditation and reflection.

The party had been given a new role—to train and shape the recruits. The fresh monks looked to them for guidance, and while they fought, read, healed, and built, the order flourished.

Tooth had developed a habit—a very problematic one. Whenever the night was calm, he disappeared, slinking into the monastery's darker halls. It was on one such evening that Elric found him, his powerful jaws grinding against one of the stone pillars in the cloister.

Elric's eyes widened in horror. "Tooth! What in all the devils are you doing?"

Tooth barely paused, chewing on the edge of a rough-hewn column. "My teeth grow, I need to wear them down."

"You're gnawing the monastery! Stop that, right now!" Elric's voice rose, his temper flaring.

“I’m not chewing the books,” Tooth muttered, still gnawing.

“That’s hardly the point!” Elric reached for his sword belt, but then groaned and rubbed his temple instead. “If you keep this up, we’ll be living under ruins!”

The argument carried through the halls until Frolde, ever the peacemaker, suggested a solution. The next morning, Tooth was handed a wetstone and a stack of heavy oak planks to gnaw on instead. It wasn’t the same, but at least the monastery pillars were saved from his relentless teeth.

Unlike many of his fellow monks, Frolde embraced cleanliness with devotion. He was known to take regular baths, far more than the others, who usually settled for a rinse after training.

“You’d swear you were some nobleman,” Uruk grumbled one morning as Frolde scrubbed at his arms, steam rising from the heated basin in the bathhouse.

Frolde, ever patient, only shrugged. “A clean body is a sharp mind.”

Uruk rolled his eyes but still tossed a bucket of cold water over Frolde’s head before stomping off to training.

Zuba had his own routine—one many found peculiar. When his duties were done, he could often be found basking in the sunlight, stretched across the smooth boulders near the monastery walls.

Elric raised a brow one day as he passed, his shadow casting over Zuba’s still form. “You could be training.”

Zuba’s tongue flicked lazily. “I could be. But the sun is warm, and warmth is strength.”

Elric sighed but let him be. After all, Zuba was a fearsome fighter when the time came. If he needed the sun to be at his best, so be it.

Uruk, unsurprisingly, found himself in frequent arguments—not out of malice, but because he loved a challenge. His loud opinions often led to heated debates with the recruits, and when words failed, he took it to the training yard.

“Fine, then! If you think you’re so quick, try me!” Uruk barked one afternoon, tossing a wooden sparring sword to one of the newer disciples.

The young man hesitated but accepted the challenge. The training yard fell silent as Uruk circled his opponent, the clash of wood on wood ringing through the mountain air. Uruk fought fiercely, yet he never injured his opponent more than necessary—a lesson in battle, not brutality.

When he finally knocked the sword from the recruit’s hands, Uruk grinned. “See? Now you know.”

Though he argued, he was one of the best teachers among them.

As the monastery grew, the party was tasked with training the new recruits, ensuring that the once-forgotten Order was reborn stronger than before. Elric drilled the warriors in discipline and swordplay, making sure they could hold a line and fight as one. Frolf instructed them in herbcraft and healing, teaching which roots to grind and which salves to apply. Zuba led tactics and survival lessons, showing them how to read the land, track enemies, and move unseen. Uruk trained them in close combat and endurance, pushing them until they could fight even when their muscles burned and their breath was ragged.

The training was not easy—bodies were bruised, pride was broken and rebuilt, and in the evenings, the recruits collapsed in exhaustion, their sweat-streaked robes clinging to them. Yet with each passing month, they grew stronger, sharper, and more unified.

By the end of half a year, the monastery had become a force to be reckoned with. No longer was it a forgotten ruin—it was a sanctuary of discipline and strength, where warriors, scholars, and healers honed their crafts under the watchful gaze of the mountain.

And at the heart of it all stood the party, not merely warriors, but mentors and leaders, shaping the future of their growing brotherhood.

The morning was cold and still when Brother Elric summoned the party to the monastery's great hall. His black eyes were unreadable as he studied them, the flickering torches casting deep shadows across the stone walls.

"There is another monastery to the west," he said at last. "Once, it was a stronghold like ours, but we have not heard from them in many seasons. We do not know if they still stand."

The party exchanged glances.

Zuba, already tightening the strap of his satchel, nodded. "We will go."

Tooth flicked his tail, adjusting his belt where his swords hung. "And if we find nothing but bones?"

Elric's expression did not change. "Then you will return, and we will mourn them as lost."

There was no further need for words. The party gathered supplies—dried meat, bread, flasks of water and wine. They packed their bedrolls and wrapped their cloaks tightly, for the wind over the mountains would be merciless.

By midday, they set out, their boots crunching over frost-covered stone as they left the monastery behind.

For the first three days, they traveled through jagged cliffs and deep valleys, the land wild and unforgiving. The air smelled of pine and damp earth, and the wind carried distant echoes of wolves howling in the night.

Each evening, they made camp, gathering twigs and dried leaves to build a small fire. The light flickered against the surrounding trees, casting long shadows as they sat and ate.

On the first night, they camped near a small mountain stream, its waters cold and clear.

Frold crouched by the edge, watching the fish dart beneath the surface. “Fresh food,” he said simply, then speared one in a swift, precise motion. The others soon followed, and they roasted their catch over the fire, the scent of sizzling fish filling the night air.

Tooth tore into his portion, licking his claws afterward. “Better than dry bread.”

Uruk leaned back against a rock, grinning. “Better than cutting trees for beds, too.”

The second night, they camped in the ruins of an old watchtower, long abandoned, its stone walls crumbling beneath the weight of time. The wind howled through the gaps in the masonry, but the shelter was enough to keep them from the worst of the cold.

Zuba sat near the fire, sharpening his blade in silence. Tooth yawned, stretching out his legs. “Feels like we’re being watched,” he muttered.

Frold blinked slowly, his throat pouch inflating slightly. “Always are.”

The third night, they hunted a wild boar, tracking its hoofprints through the damp earth. The creature charged when cornered, tusks gleaming in the moonlight, but Zuba drove his sword deep into its flank, and Frold finished it with a thrust of his spear.

As they roasted the thick slabs of meat, Uruk let out a satisfied sigh. “If all missions involve hunting and eating like this, I’ll never complain again.”

On the fourth day, as they passed through a narrow gorge, a sudden roar split the air.

From the rocky outcrops above, six figures leapt down, landing in the dust with heavy thuds.

Orcs.

Their muscles were thick as stone, their armor was crude but strong, and their yellowed tusks gleamed with menace. Each carried massive weapons—battle-axes, cleavers, jagged swords.

The largest of them stepped forward, his scarred face twisted into a sneer. “Fresh meat,” he growled. “You should not have come this way.”

Tooth unsheathed his blades. “Neither should you.”

And then, the battle began.

The first orc charged at Frold, his axe swinging in a vicious arc. Frold barely raised his shield in time, the impact rattling through his bones. He pushed back, thrusting his spear low, piercing through the orc’s thigh. The creature roared in pain, but did not fall.

Zuba met two at once, their massive cleavers crashing down toward him. He rolled to the side, his blade flashing, slicing deep into one’s side. The second orc’s attack caught him across the shoulder, sending him staggering backward, blood dripping down his arm.

Tooth darted between his foes, quick as a shadow, slashing at their tendons, cutting where armor was weak. One orc lunged at him, but he leapt onto its back, stabbing both swords into the base of its neck.

Uruk took a heavy blow to the ribs, nearly knocking him to the ground, but he roared in defiance and drove his sword straight through the orc's gut. The creature choked, blood bubbling from its mouth, and collapsed.

The remaining two orcs fought wildly, their eyes filled with bloodlust.

One caught Zuba with a backhanded blow, sending him crashing against the rock wall. His vision blurred, his ears rang, and for a moment, darkness threatened to take him.

Frold saw him go down and let out a guttural croak. "Zuba! Get up!"

Zuba's fingers dug into the dirt, his mind spinning. He could hear the clashing of swords, the growls of orcs, the shouts of his allies. His body screamed in pain, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to crawl forward, reaching for his sword.

Tooth barely had time to react before a massive club smashed into his face.

His head snapped back, and he spat blood, feeling a crack in his jaw.

"Bastards!" he snarled, staggering back up, fury burning in his eyes.

The last two orcs, though wounded, fought with the ferocity of wild beasts.

Zuba, still crawling, muttered a single word under his breath. His fingers glowed with fire, and with his last bit of strength, he thrust his burning palm against one of the orcs' chests.

Flames erupted, engulfing the creature.

It screamed, flailing, before collapsing into a smoldering heap.

The final orc, now alone, snarled and swung wildly at Uruk.

Uruk sidestepped, ducking under the heavy blow, and drove his blade into the orc's exposed side.

The creature gasped, shuddered, and collapsed.

And just like that, it was over.

The party stood amidst the bodies, panting, bloodied, exhausted.

Frold checked Zuba, who was still on the ground, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "Alive."

Tooth wiped the blood from his face, spitting out a loose tooth. "Damn orcs."

Uruk grinned despite the pain. "They hit hard, but we hit harder."

With no time to waste, they gathered their strength and pressed on. Their mission was not yet complete.

Lost Temple

After many grueling days of travel, the party neared their destination. The mountain air had grown colder, and the scent of damp stone and pine needles lingered around them. The path ahead wound through jagged cliffs, and at its end, nestled between the craggy peaks, stood the monastery they had been sent to find.

But something was wrong.

As they approached, the distant sound of clashing steel and desperate shouts reached their ears.

Through the thinning mist, they saw two monks in ragged cloaks, their bodies bruised and bleeding, fending off a group of seven human bandits. The monks fought valiantly, bare hands striking against steel, but they were losing ground.

Without a word, the party rushed forward.

The bandits turned just in time to see death descending upon them.

The first bandit barely had time to react before Tooth was upon him. The rat-man moved with terrifying speed, his sword flashing in the dim light. He slashed across the man's belly, spilling intestines onto the ground. The bandit's scream barely left his throat before Tooth drove his second blade into his ribs, twisting cruelly. The man gurgled, shuddered, then fell lifelessly into the dirt.

Another bandit turned to run, but Frolde leaped onto him with the force of a hunting beast. The frog's powerful legs coiled and launched him forward, his shield smashing the bandit's skull with a sickening crunch. The man staggered, dazed, and before he could recover, Frolde's spear plunged through his throat.

Zuba's sword sliced through the air, clashing against an enemy blade. The bandit grinned, thinking he had the upper hand, but Zuba twisted his wrist, redirecting the strike. With a sharp, controlled thrust, he drove his sword through the bandit's chest, impaling him clean through.

Uruk brawled with two at once, dodging, weaving, laughing as he cut into their flesh. One lunged at him with an axe, but he sidestepped, slashing the tendons behind the man's knee. The bandit collapsed, screaming, only for Uruk to bury his blade into his back.

The final two realized too late that they were doomed. One dropped his sword, falling to his knees, pleading. "Wait! Please! We—"

Tooth grinned, baring his sharp teeth. "Wrong place. Wrong time."

With one swift motion, he dragged his sword across the man's throat, sending blood gushing onto the cold stone.

The last bandit turned to flee, sprinting toward the trees.

Zuba raised his hand.

The air hummed with power, and with a flick of his wrist, a bolt of fire erupted from his palm. The flames engulfed the fleeing bandit, his screams echoing in the mountains as he collapsed into a burning heap.

And just like that, it was over.

The air was thick with the stench of blood and burnt flesh.

Silence fell over the battlefield, broken only by the heavy breathing of the victors.

Then, something primal stirred.

Tooth licked his lips, his black eyes darting to the freshly slain corpses. His tail twitched hungrily.

Zuba crouched beside a bandit's lifeless form, his clawed fingers digging into the still-warm flesh. His forked tongue flickered as he ripped a strip of meat from the corpse's back and devoured it greedily.

Frold, without hesitation, grabbed a severed leg and tilted his head back, swallowing it whole. His throat bulged as the limb disappeared into his gullet, his cold gaze showing no remorse.

Tooth, crouching beside a bloodied arm, lifted it to his mouth and gnawed hungrily at the bone, his sharp teeth crunching through flesh and sinew. He wiped the blood from his muzzle and let out a satisfied sigh.

Uruk, watching the display, shook his head and spat. "You're all monsters."

Tooth grinned, blood staining his whiskers. "And you're surprised?"

Zuba continued to tear at his meal, his black eyes reflecting nothing but hunger.

Frold let out a low croak, his belly full. "Waste not."

The two monks, standing in shock, watched in horrified silence.

Finally, Tooth wiped his blade on the corpse and stood. "Enough fun. Now, tell us—what the hell happened here?"

The two monks, still pale and trembling, exchanged glances before one of them spoke. "This monastery... it has been under siege. For months."

The other monk, a younger man with a gash across his forehead, nodded quickly. “Creatures. Bandits. They come at night, they attack the walls, they set fire to our food stores.”

Zuba wiped the blood from his claws. “How many of you are left?”

The first monk lowered his head. “We were twenty. Now, we are two.”

The party exchanged glances. The monastery was supposed to be a stronghold, a place of sanctuary. But it was clear that whatever had happened here had left it in ruin.

Frold ran a webbed hand over a crack in the monastery wall. “Weak. Needs fixing.”

Uruk crossed his arms. “If we don’t help, this place will fall. And if it falls, the Order grows weaker.”

Tooth flicked his tail, still chewing on a piece of flesh. “Then we fix it.”

Zuba nodded, stepping toward the monastery gates. “We begin now.”

The first night, they fortified the walls, repairing the weakest points with stacked stone and mortar.

Zuba used his knowledge of crafting to seal the cracks, making sure the cold wouldn’t creep in through the ruined halls.

Frold and Uruk hauled heavy wooden beams, reinforcing the doors and window frames, securing them against further attacks.

Tooth climbed the rooftops, inspecting damage and replacing broken tiles. His small frame made him nimble, allowing him to patch up gaps where rain and wind had started to seep in.

For weeks, they worked tirelessly—rebuilding, reinforcing, restoring.

Every day, the monks watched with silent gratitude.

Every night, the party slept in the ruined halls, listening for the sounds of enemies in the dark.

The monastery had nearly fallen.

But with their hands, it would stand again.

Weeks passed, and the monastery stood stronger than before. The walls had been repaired, the cracks in the stone sealed, and the halls no longer echoed with the emptiness of death. The two remaining monks, once barely clinging to hope, had found purpose again. The party had ensured that the sanctuary would not crumble.

But the mountains were not kind to those who sought peace.

One cold morning, as the wind howled over the rocky cliffs, a band of seven orcs emerged from the mist. Their green, scarred bodies were wrapped in crude iron and tattered furs, their

weapons heavy and stained with old blood. Their leader, a towering brute with a jagged axe slung over his shoulder, pointed toward the monastery's walls and snarled.

"Break the gates! Kill them all!"

The roar of war erupted once more.

The orcs charged, their heavy boots pounding the earth, weapons raised.

Tooth, perched on the monastery's half-repaired wall, let out a sharp whistle. "More meat for the blade!" He unsheathed his swords and leapt down into the fray.

Frold held the monastery's main gate, his shield locked against the blows of two orcs. One swung a massive club at him, but he angled his shield just right, deflecting the strike and responding with a precise thrust of his spear into the orc's ribs.

Zuba stood atop the steps, channeling power into his hands. A deep, guttural incantation left his lips, and fire roared from his claws, engulfing one of the raiders. The orc's shrieks filled the air as flames consumed him, the sickening stench of burning flesh mixing with the cold wind.

Uruk fought like a beast, hacking and slashing with a bloodthirsty grin. He ducked beneath an axe swing, severed an orc's hand at the wrist, and drove his sword into the creature's chest before kicking him off the blade. "Is that all you've got!?" he roared, blood dripping down his arms.

The orcs were strong, relentless, but the Temple Knights were stronger.

By the time the last orc collapsed onto the monastery steps, choking on his own blood, the battle was over. The walls of the sanctuary were stained red once more.

Tooth wiped the blood from his blade, his black eyes flickering with something colder than amusement. "This will happen again. And next time, there'll be more."

Zuba gave a slow nod, his golden eyes scanning the bodies. "We need more warriors."

Frold, still gripping his spear, croaked his agreement. "More hands. More blades."

And so, the party set out once more—not for war, but for recruits.

For weeks, they traveled through the surrounding villages and towns, speaking of the Order, of its cause, of the battle for the monastery.

They stood in market squares, at the steps of temples, in the smoky halls of taverns, spreading the word of the Temple Knights.

Zuba, ever the stoic, spoke of strength, of honor, of duty. His deep, measured voice carried through the streets, drawing the ears of those who had nothing, those who sought purpose.

Frold demonstrated the spear techniques of the Order, displaying the discipline and training that could turn any man into a warrior.

Tooth, ever cunning, whispered to the desperate and the hungry, offering them not just faith, but a future.

Uruk made promises of battle and blood, enticing those who lived for war. "We don't sit in halls praying. We fight. We kill. We make our enemies tremble."

And it worked.

Eighteen men and women pledged themselves to the Order. Some were farmhands who wished to become warriors. Some were old mercenaries looking for a greater cause. Some were street-thieves who saw redemption in the sword.

They marched back to the monastery with new blood at their side.

Weapons were needed. The party took coin from the monastery's vaults and visited a weaponsmith in Darthur, purchasing spears, swords, shields, and bows.

Training began immediately.

Frold taught them discipline, shield formations, endurance.

Tooth drilled them in speed, precision, unpredictability.

Zuba instilled focus, patience, the understanding of magic's role in war.

Uruk simply beat them senseless until they learned to fight back. "If you can't kill me, you're not ready."

Day by day, they hardened.

The monastery was no longer just a place of prayer. It was becoming a fortress.

Attacks came again—small raiding parties, lone assassins in the night, but they were forced back every time.

And then, the real enemy came.

One evening, as the sun dipped behind the jagged peaks, ten figures approached the monastery gates.

Clad in dark robes, their faces hidden beneath hoods, they carried weapons of wicked design—curved daggers, bloodstained flails, runed staffs pulsing with dark energy.

One of them, their leader, stepped forward, his voice like a knife scraping against stone.

"The Order of the Temple Knights is an insult to the true path. You claim to seek discipline, yet you are but a remnant of a dying faith. We have come to cleanse you."

Tooth spat on the ground. “Get in line, bastard. Plenty have tried.”

And the battle began.

The cultists moved fast, unnaturally fast, their spells cracking the air.

One of the recruits was burned alive in an instant, his screams echoing in the mountain pass.

Frold blocked a flurry of dagger strikes, countering with a precise spear thrust, impaling one of the robed figures through the chest.

Zuba channeled his own magic, matching their dark flames with searing fire of his own. The air exploded with heat as his spells clashed with theirs.

Tooth danced between enemies, slashing tendons, severing throats, tearing into the enemy like a whirlwind of steel.

Uruk met one of the cultists head-on, swinging his sword with brutal strength, cutting the man in half. Blood splattered across the stone walls.

The battle was brutal, the clash of steel and magic filling the monastery grounds.

One of the cultists, bleeding and desperate, tried to flee.

Tooth pounced on him, driving his blades deep into his back. He leaned down, whispering in the man’s ear as he twisted the steel. “You should have stayed in the shadows.”

As the last cultist fell, silence settled once more.

Blood ran down the stone steps, the monastery now a place of war.

The new recruits had fought well. The monastery had held.

Brother Oric, surveying the carnage, gave a slow nod. “The world has taken notice of us. That is both a blessing and a curse. There will be more battles to come.”

Tooth wiped blood from his face, grinning. “Good.”

Zuba sheathed his sword. “We are ready.”

Frold croaked, “Let them come.”

Uruk laughed, “We’ll kill them all.”

And so, the Temple Knights had become more than survivors.

They had become a force.

For half a year, the monastery had become a fortress of warriors.

The once-crumbling walls now stood firm and unyielding, reinforced with stone and iron. The warriors they had gathered and trained had forged themselves into something greater than mere monks—Temple Knights in truth, bound by steel, discipline, and faith.

They repelled wave after wave of attackers, striking down bandits, raiders, and heretics who sought to wipe them out. The monastery earned its reputation in blood, and soon the enemy learned not to come at all.

With the arrival of eight more recruits, their numbers had swelled to twenty-five strong. The once-forgotten monastery was now feared, its name spoken in whispers across the mountains.

Then, one cold morning, a raven arrived.

The black-feathered messenger perched atop the monastery gate, its beady eyes glinting with intelligence.

Tooth, ever cautious, approached it first. “Well, well. Someone’s got a message for us.” He reached for the small rolled parchment tied to the raven’s leg and unraveled it, his black eyes scanning the words.

He handed the letter to Zuba. “It’s from Elric.”

The lizardman took it, reading aloud in his deep, steady voice.

"The time has come for the Order to grow once more. You have done well. Now, you must leave the monastery in the hands of those you have trained. Travel to Runecald. There, you will establish a new stronghold. The path is long, but the Order must spread, as it did in the old days. You know what must be done. Steel and spirit—always."

A long silence settled among them.

Finally, Froid exhaled, adjusting the leather strap on his spear. “We leave.”

Uruk cracked his knuckles, grinning. “Time for a new city to hear our name.”

They looked upon the monastery one last time. The monks, now warriors in their own right, stood on the walls, their black hand and sword-emblem cloaks fluttering in the wind. These men were no longer students—they were guardians.

And so, the party set out once more, leaving behind the fortress they had built in blood.

Runecald was three weeks’ travel from the monastery, a city of stone towers, merchants, and noble courts. They traveled steadily, moving through valleys and forests, hunting game when food ran low, stopping in villages to replenish supplies.

Each night, they camped in secluded spots, hidden from the roads. The air was thick with the scent of pine and damp earth, the distant hoot of owls the only sound accompanying their quiet meals.

On the fifth night, they roasted a fat hare over the fire. Tooth gnawed on a bone, flicking his tail as he chewed. "Runecald, huh? Big city. Do you think they'll even want us there?"

Zuba turned the blade in his hands, sharpening its edge. "Want or not, we will build."

Frold stared into the fire, his webbed fingers absently turning a stick. "They will learn the ways. Just as the others did."

Uruk grinned, his fangs flashing in the dim light. "And if they don't like it, we'll remind them why we exist."

They moved forward, step by step, battle-hardened and unshaken.

One week into their journey, the forest grew thick and tangled, the trees pressing close on either side of the narrow path. The air was humid and heavy, the scent of damp moss clinging to them.

Then, without warning—a rustling in the underbrush.

Tooth's ears twitched. "We're not alone."

A sharp, guttural cackle rang through the air.

Then, from the shadows, they emerged.

Fifteen goblins burst from the trees, their yellow eyes gleaming with hunger and malice. Clad in scraps of armor and wielding rusted blades, spears, and crude bows, they let out shrill battle cries as they charged.

Tooth drew his swords in a flash, his lips pulling back in a snarl. "Kill them all."

The first goblin lunged at Frold, jabbing a rusty spear toward his gut.

Frold twisted his body, catching the spear on his shield. With a quick counter-thrust, he rammed his spear through the goblin's throat. Blood spurted, and the creature collapsed with a choking gurgle.

Tooth danced between two goblins, his blades flashing. He sliced open one's stomach, spilling its innards, before spinning and ramming his other sword into the next goblin's eye.

Zuba met a larger goblin head-on, blocking a vicious axe swing with his sword. The impact rattled his bones, but he pushed forward, his clawed foot smashing into the goblin's knee, sending it crashing to the ground. He brought his blade down in a brutal arc, splitting the creature's skull open.

Uruk, laughing wildly, grabbed a goblin by the throat and smashed its head into a tree. The sickening crack of bone echoed through the forest as he threw the limp body aside.

The goblins howled in fury, trying to overwhelm them.

One leapt onto Tooth's back, clawing at his face. Tooth snarled, flipping the creature over his shoulder and driving his sword straight into its chest.

Another goblin archer loosed an arrow, the crude shaft burying itself into Zuba's shoulder. He barely flinched, gripping the **arrow shaft and ripping it free with a snarl. His fingers ignited, and with a furious incantation, he hurled a fireball into the archer's face. The goblin shrieked as flames engulfed it, its charred body crumpling into the dirt.

Frold ripped his spear free from a goblin's gut, then twirled it and struck another across the face, sending it reeling. Before it could recover, he stabbed downward, pinning it to the ground.

Uruk grabbed the last goblin, lifting it into the air. The creature screamed, kicking wildly.

"Shut up," Uruk growled, before snapping its neck with one violent twist.

The goblin horde lay in ruins.

Blood pooled around them, bodies twisted and broken. The scent of burning flesh, fresh gore, and sweat filled the air.

Tooth wiped his blade clean on a corpse, grinning. "Good warm-up."

Zuba examined his wounded shoulder but said nothing. He simply tore a strip of cloth from a dead goblin's tunic and wrapped it tightly.

Frold croaked lowly, kicking one of the bodies aside. "They were desperate. Probably starving."

Uruk spat into the dirt. "Not our problem."

They stood there for a moment, listening to the forest, waiting to see if more would come.

Silence.

Tooth exhaled and flicked his tail. "Onward."

The party continued down the path, leaving the massacre behind them.

Their mission was far from over.

Ahead, Runecald awaited.

The journey to Runecald was long, brutal, and bloody.

Over the remaining two weeks of travel, the party was tested again and again.

They fought five more battles—each different, each a testament to their endurance.

A group of orc raiders fell upon them at dawn, their crude axes and iron-studded clubs crashing against steel. The party met them with unrelenting fury, hacking through their ranks in a whirlwind of blood.

A pack of black-furred wolves attacked them by nightfall, their yellow eyes gleaming hungrily in the moonlight. Tooth snarled back at them, slashing through fur and bone, while Frold used his long spear to keep the beasts at bay.

A nest of massive spiders ambushed them in a dense forest, chitinous legs scuttling over the trees. Zuba set the webs aflame with magic, the smoke rising into the night like a beacon of their struggle.

Bandits—**humans and elves alike**—**tried to rob them on the road, but the Temple Knights were no mere travelers. Steel met flesh, arrows missed their marks, and blood was spilled upon the cobbled paths.

By the time Runecald finally rose on the horizon, the party was battered, bloodied, and victorious.

Runecald

Runecald was a city of stone and smoke, of merchants and thieves, of nobility and beggars.

The streets twisted through towering buildings, narrow alleys snaking between homes of wood and brick. Smoke curled from chimneys, mingling with the scent of baked bread, roasting meat, and filth.

The city's center was lined with market stalls, where merchants shouted their wares, gold and silver exchanging hands beneath awnings of deep red and faded blue. In the richer districts, the homes of noble families stood tall, their banners fluttering in the wind, their guards watching the streets with keen eyes.

But in the shadows of these grand streets, the poor district stretched like a wound.

Here, the roads were uneven, homes built close together with sagging roofs and wooden doors. Smoke drifted from blacksmiths' forges, and the air carried the sharp scent of tanneries, sweat, and unwashed bodies.

This was where the Temple Knights would plant their roots.

Before claiming their place in the city, the party sought rest.

The Black Mink Tavern sat in the heart of Runecald's rowdier districts, a broad, two-story building of dark oak, its windows fogged with heat and ale fumes. Inside, the air was thick with laughter, the clatter of mugs, the distant strumming of a lute.

The party collapsed into chairs near the fire, their armor scratched, their cloaks damp from the road.

Uruk slammed his fist on the table. “ALE. NOW.”

A barmaid—heavyset, with sharp eyes—nodded and filled five mugs, sloshing frothy amber liquid onto the wooden surface.

Tooth lifted his tankard, foam dripping down his chin as he drank deep. “By the gods, that’s good.”

Zuba sat silently, his eyes reflecting the firelight, his muscles aching from the weeks of battle.

Frold leaned back against the chair, tilting his head back. “The Temple Knights have arrived in Runecald.”

Their voices carried through the tavern, drawing ears, drawing interest.

And so, they spoke of the Order, of the monastery in the mountains, of the warriors who stood against darkness.

And soon, people listened.

After a week of searching, they found a suitable place to establish their new monastery.

A stone house in the poor district, abandoned but sturdy, sat nestled between a tanner’s workshop and a weaver’s shop. The air smelled of smoke and sweat, but it would serve.

The party set to work.

The front hall was converted into a prayer room, where a simple altar was built—a rough stone slab with the black hand and sword emblem of the Order carved into it.

The back rooms became living quarters, with straw mattresses and wooden beds set against the walls.

The courtyard was cleared and turned into a training ground, where the recruits would learn the way of the sword and shield.

They searched the city for books, purchasing old tomes and scrolls from bookshops and scholars, building a small library where knowledge would be preserved.

Slowly, the monastery took form.

As word spread, the first recruits arrived.

Some were lost souls—orphans, beggars, and outcasts looking for purpose.



Some were former mercenaries, tired of fighting for coin, now seeking a cause worth bleeding for.

And some were simply warriors in spirit, drawn to the power and discipline of the Temple Knights.

Each was tested.

They recited the warrior prayers, they trained until their muscles screamed, they bore the weight of their new lives.

Tooth oversaw their drills, ensuring they were swift and unpredictable in battle.

Frold taught them the foundations of endurance, the use of spears, the art of defense.

Zuba instructed the most disciplined among them in the basics of magic, teaching them how to harness fire, heal wounds, and steel their minds.

Uruk simply fought them, bruised them, broke them, and made them stronger. “If you fall, get up. If you hesitate, you die. We do not accept weakness.”

Each night, they gathered at the altar, chanting the words of the Temple Knights:

"Steel in hand, fire in soul, spirit unyielding. We stand, we fight, we endure."

And so, the monastery in Runecald was born.

The days began before dawn.

The bells rang through the poor district, and the recruits assembled in the courtyard, ready to train.

Mornings were spent sparring, running drills, learning footwork and swordplay.

Afternoons were devoted to scripture and study, copying old texts, reading the wisdom of warriors past.

Evenings were filled with combat practice, endurance trials, and the sacred warrior prayers.

Some days, the party would venture into the city, spreading the teachings of the Temple Knights, seeking more recruits, offering aid to the injured.

Slowly, the monastery became known. And so, the Order grew. The party had carved their mark upon Runecald.

The monastery stood silent beneath the night sky, its stone walls casting long shadows under the flickering glow of distant lanterns. The air was cold and still, the streets of Runecald quiet—too quiet.

A figure moved through the darkness.

Wrapped in black silks, his face masked, he slipped through an open window, his steps soundless. The assassin's breath was measured, his hands deft and quick. He had one goal—the magic stone of the Temple Knights.

He crept through the hallways, his fingers grazing the wooden walls, memorizing the structure as he moved.

The first stop was the monks' living quarters.

Soft breathing filled the air, bodies shifting in sleep. The assassin moved like a shadow, his gloved fingers sliding open drawers, searching for anything of value.

A few coins disappeared into his pouch. A silver cup, heavy and well-crafted, was tucked away. He found no sign of the stone.

Then, his eyes settled on the altar room.

He stepped forward, silent as death.

But he was not alone.

Tooth knelt before the altar, his black eyes closed in silent prayer. The flickering candlelight cast jagged shadows against the walls, his tail flicking absently as he whispered the warrior's creed:

"Steel in hand, fire in soul, spirit unyielding. We stand, we fight, we endure."

The moment the assassin moved, Tooth's ears twitched.

Then—steel flashed.

The assassin lunged, his dagger slicing toward Tooth's throat.

Tooth barely had time to react, twisting just in time to avoid a fatal blow. The blade grazed his shoulder, warm blood spilling onto his cloak.

The ratman snarled, rolling back, drawing his swords in a flash. "Wrong place, bastard."

The assassin moved with inhuman speed, his strikes swift and merciless. His dagger slashed and twisted, aiming for Tooth's vitals.

Tooth parried, his blades clashing against the assassin's steel. The fight whirled through the altar room, knocking over candles, smashing against wooden beams.

The assassin drove a knee into Tooth's gut, forcing the ratman to stumble back, but Tooth was relentless.

With a feral growl, he lunged forward, driving his sword into the assassin's ribs.

The man gasped, but still fought. Tooth slammed him against the wall, stabbing again— And again. And again. Twenty times, his blade pierced flesh, warm blood spilling onto the stone floor. The assassin gasped for breath, his hands trembling, his mask soaked in blood. "The stone..." he choked out, his voice rasping. "Give it... to me."

His body slumped, his lifeless eyes staring into the void. Tooth stood over him, panting, wiping blood from his mouth. He crouched and searched the body. Coins, knives, vials of poison—and an amulet. A golden sun, its rays curling like flames.

Soon, the entire monastery was awake. Frold and Zuba stood over the body as Tooth tossed them the amulet. Uruk growled. "So these bastards sent a knife into our home?"

And so, the Temple Knights prepared for revenge. The Golden Dawn cult was not subtle.

They operated out of a lavish estate in the upper district, their wealth flaunted with gold-trimmed banners, hooded figures moving in and out under heavy guard.

But beneath Runecald, a network of tunnels ran like veins through the city's underbelly.

Frold led the way, his keen amphibian senses guiding them through the darkness. The party moved silently beneath the city, their weapons drawn, their eyes sharp.

After an hour of navigating, they found themselves beneath the Golden Dawn estate.

Above them, the sounds of chanting and muffled laughter filtered through the floorboards.

Tooth grinned. "They won't hear us coming."

With careful hands, they pried open a floor hatch, stepping into a dimly lit storeroom.

A massive chest sat before them, filled to the brim with gleaming silver coins.

Uruk let out a low whistle. "A chest full of silver. This'll do."

Without hesitation, they hoisted the chest, carrying it back into the tunnels.

With newfound wealth, the monastery flourished. Weapons and armor were purchased, forging the recruits into true warriors. Steel-clad fighters now walked the halls, their cloaks bearing the black hand and sword emblem. More recruits came, drawn by tales of the monastery's unyielding warriors. Now, they were forty strong. No longer just a refuge, the monastery had become a force—a rising power in Runecald.

The morning air was crisp as the Temple Knights' monks marched through the streets of Runecald, their black and silver cloaks billowing in the wind. The sigil of the Black Hand and Sword was displayed on their backs and banners, a solemn reminder of discipline, strength, and purpose.

Their march was silent, yet powerful—a procession of faith, of warriors who had once fought to protect the weak and would do so again. As they passed, they offered prayers to beggars, handed out bread to the hungry, and spoke words of wisdom to those who sought guidance.

Runecald's market square was bustling, merchants calling out their wares, the scent of freshly baked bread and roasting meat mingling with the city's ever-present smoke. But not all who watched the procession saw them as protectors.

Near the steps of a grand stone building, hooded figures in gold-stitched robes stood watching. The Golden Dawn Cult—their enemies.

Their leader, a gaunt man with piercing yellow eyes, sneered as the Temple Knights passed.

"Behold, the relics of a failed order," he called out, his voice dripping with contempt. "The ghosts of broken men, clinging to old prayers and dead gods."

A ripple of low laughter spread through the gathered cultists.

One of them, a young zealot, spat onto the ground near the monks. "Go back to your crumbling halls. The city does not belong to you."

The monks ignored the provocation, their training keeping them disciplined, their eyes fixed forward. But the cultists were not finished.

A stone flew through the air.

It struck a young monk—Brother Kellan—on the side of the head. He staggered, his hand flying to the fresh wound as blood ran down his temple.

The cultists cheered.

Another stone hurled through the air. Then another.

The monks held their ground, their hands clenching at their sides. But when one of them fell, tumbling to the cobbled street, something in the procession broke.

Zuba and Uruk, who had been leading the march, stepped forward.

The next stone never landed—Zuba caught it midair, crushing it in his clawed fist. His black eyes glimmered with controlled fury.

"Enough." His voice was like thunder before the storm.

The gaunt cultist smiled. "You think to silence us, lizard?"

Then he lunged—a hidden blade flashing in the light.

Zuba moved with unnatural precision.

The blade never reached its mark—he caught the cultist's wrist, twisting it until the man screamed. The dagger clattered to the ground.

Uruk was less graceful.

One of the cultists charged, and Uruk met him head-on, his fist slamming into the man's face with a sickening crunch. The cultist hit the ground hard, blood spraying from his broken nose.

A second attacker swung a wooden staff at Zuba. He sidestepped, grabbed the weapon, and yanked it forward, sending the cultist sprawling onto the ground.

Then the true fight erupted. Swords were drawn. Fists flew.

The monks, though trained in restraint, were warriors at their core. They blocked, countered, and defended, trying to subdue rather than kill.

But the cultists fought with fanatic rage.

One cultist leapt onto a merchant's stall, swinging his dagger down toward Uruk's neck.

Uruk caught the man's wrist in midair and threw him off the stall. The cultist landed hard, skidding across the cobblestones.

Another lunged for Zuba, swinging a rusted mace.

Zuba dodged, grabbed the man by the collar, and slammed him into a stone pillar. The impact sent the cultist crumpling to the ground.

One of the monks, Brother Alric, tried to hold a defensive stance, but a cultist swept his legs out from under him, pinning him down with a blade.

Tooth appeared out of nowhere, his sword flashing. The cultist's dagger went flying, and the next second, Tooth had him pressed against the wall, blade at his throat.

"Make another move," Tooth hissed, "and I carve your face into something even uglier."

The marketplace descended into chaos. Merchants scrambled to move their stalls, civilians ran for cover, and still, the fight raged.

Then—a loud whistle.

The Runecald city guard stormed in, their blue-and-steel armor gleaming under the morning sun.

"Enough!" shouted their captain, his voice booming over the fray. "Drop your weapons!"

The combatants froze, breathing heavily, bodies bruised, blood on the cobblestones.

The Golden Dawn cultists sneered, their leader wiping blood from his lip.

"This is not over," he hissed. "The Temple Knights will fall, just as they did before."

Then, as the guards forced both groups apart, the cultists melted back into the shadows of the city.

Zuba and Uruk turned to the wounded monks, helping Brother Kellan to his feet.

The young monk winced, blood still trickling down his face. "I should have fought."

Zuba placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. "You will. But not today."

They gathered their fallen, their injured, and retreated back to the monastery.

Back at the monastery, the halls were quiet, save for the soft murmurs of healing prayers.

Zuba stood before the gathered monks, his voice low but resolute.

"The Golden Dawn seeks to break us. They will not succeed."

Frold tightened his grip on his spear. "They spill our blood in the streets. We must be ready."

Uruk grinned, despite his split lip. "Let them come again. We'll send them back with fewer teeth."

Tooth leaned against the doorway, watching the flickering torchlight. "We're past the days of hiding. They want a war?"

His black eyes gleamed.

"Then we give them one."

For months, the Temple Knights had labored tirelessly, their monastery in Runecald expanding.

The once-simple stone house had grown into a fortress of faith and steel.

Masons and carpenters worked day and night, raising new stone walls, reinforcing the training grounds, and expanding the living quarters to house the growing number of recruits.

But not everyone in Runecald welcomed their rise.

In the shadows, the Golden Dawn watched. They saw the monastery's growth not as progress, but as a threat—a monument to an order they despised.

And so, they planned.

For months, the Temple Knights had labored tirelessly, their monastery in Runecald expanding.

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The streets of Runecald lay shrouded in silence, the city's usual chaos stilled beneath the weight of the late hour. A cold wind slithered through the narrow alleyways, whispering against the stone walls.

Then, amidst the darkness, figures moved.

Hooded and masked, they crept along the monastery's perimeter. Their hands clutched clay jars filled with oil, their boots making no sound on the damp cobblestone.

One by one, they shattered the jars against the wooden scaffolding that surrounded the unfinished sections of the monastery. A spark. A flicker. A single glowing ember was enough. Then—flames roared to life.

They climbed hungrily, licking up the wooden beams, twisting red and orange against the black of night. The smoke thickened, rolling upward into the sky.

A moment of silence. Then—the alarm bells rang. The monastery erupted with movement. Monks and recruits stormed from their chambers, their bare feet pounding against the wooden floors.

“Water!” Zuba’s voice cut through the chaos, his black eyes burning like the flames themselves.

They formed a line, buckets of water hurled upon the fire, steam hissing where liquid met flame. The scaffolding groaned, creaking under the heat, the wood splintering, collapsing inward.

Through the smoke, Tooth’s sharp ears twitched.

Movement.

A shadow darted between the alleyways, slipping away into the night.

“There!” Tooth snarled, unsheathing his swords.

The chase began.

The cultists fled through the city, their robes whipping in the wind, their feet hammering against the cobblestone.

Tooth and Uruk charged after them, weaving through narrow streets, their breaths fogging in the cold air.

Above them, Zuba moved differently.

He didn’t run.

He climbed.

His clawed hands gripped the rooftops, his legs propelling him upward with practiced ease. He raced across the slanted tiles, following the fleeing shadows from above, his breath steady despite the frigid wind.

Below, the cultists turned a corner, vanishing into a dead-end alley.

They stopped, panting, realizing too late they were trapped.

Then—a heavy thud.

Zuba landed in front of them, blocking their escape.

Tooth and Uruk closed in from behind.

The cultists spun around, daggers drawn, eyes wild with desperation.

One of them—a gaunt man with a scarred face—spat blood onto the ground.

“You cannot stop the dawn,” he sneered, his lip curling. “The light will burn you to ash.”

Uruk cracked his knuckles. “I’ve had enough of this cultist shit.”

The fight lasted seconds.

One tried to stab Uruk—he broke the man’s wrist with a sickening snap, sending the dagger clattering to the ground.

Another lunged at Tooth, but the rat-man sidestepped and drove his sword into the cultist’s knee, twisting cruelly.

Zuba grabbed the last man by the throat, slamming him against the wall.

The cultist gasped, choking, but still grinned through the pain.

“The Golden Dawn will erase you,” he rasped. “You fight for corpses and ghosts.”

Tooth leaned in close, his breath warm against the cultist’s cheek. “You came into my home. You tried to burn it. And now?”

He nodded to Uruk.

With one brutal swing, Uruk smashed the cultist’s right hand, shattering the bones beneath the skin. The man screamed, collapsing to his knees.

Zuba **drew his knife and carved the mark of the Temple Knights—**a black hand—into the man's forehead.

Blood ran down his face, the carving deep, precise.

“Run back to your masters,” Zuba said coldly. “Tell them the Temple Knights do not burn. We endure.”

And with that, they let him go.

The injured cultist scrambled away, disappearing into the darkness.

The fire had been contained, but the scars remained.

By dawn, the monastery still stood, though parts of it were blackened with soot, wooden beams reduced to ash.

The monks gathered in the main hall, their faces grim.

Frold examined the scorched remains of the scaffolding. “They wanted to break us.”

Uruk scoffed, arms crossed. "They failed."

Tooth stood at the monastery door, his tail flicking. "No." He gestured to the wood.

There, painted in black ash, was a symbol of the enemy. A burning sun. The mark of the Golden Dawn.

The Grand Cathedral of Runecald stood as a beacon of neutrality—a place where rival factions set aside their blades and disputes were settled with words, not blood. But not tonight.

At the top of the cathedral steps, beneath the towering stained-glass windows, stood a Golden Dawn preacher, his voice sharp and venomous.

"The Temple Knights are pretenders!" he bellowed, his golden-stitched robes fluttering in the evening wind. "A dying order clinging to rusted swords and faded prayers! False saints, cowards hiding behind their walls!"

His words carried over the gathered crowd, drawing murmurs and nods of agreement from the cultists below.

At the base of the steps, the Temple Knights stood unmoved.

Tooth and Uruk led the formation, their cloaks heavy over their armor, their black hand and sword sigils gleaming against the torchlight.

Tooth's tail flicked. "Cowards, huh?" he muttered.

Uruk cracked his knuckles, grinning through gritted teeth. "Sounds like he wants to eat through a straw."

The monks stood firm, their expressions impassive, but the tension in the air was thick, suffocating.

The preacher's eyes burned with fanatical zeal. He raised his hand, gesturing toward the Temple Knights. "If your Order still holds divine favor, let it be tested in the old way! A duel! One warrior from each side! The gods will decide who stands in truth!"

The crowd stirred. The challenge was issued. A hush fell over the city square. Tooth stepped forward, his black eyes cold. "I accept."

A murmur ran through the Golden Dawn ranks. Then, from the cathedral doors, a giant of a man emerged. Raltor the Gilded.

He was a towering warrior, his gold-plated armor reflecting the candlelight, his flamberge—a massive, undulating greatsword—engraved with ancient runes. His face was twisted in a smile, his confidence absolute.

"You?" Raltor scoffed, his voice like rolling thunder. "They send a rat against me?"

Tooth rolled his shoulders, loosening his blades in their scabbards. “Less talking. More dying.” The crowd pulled back, forming a wide circle at the foot of the cathedral steps. The duel began.

Raltor moved first, swinging his massive flamberge in a devastating arc. The blade howled through the air, its edge gleaming. Tooth darted back, narrowly avoiding the strike. The marble step where he stood split apart, stone shattering beneath the force of Raltor’s swing. The Golden Dawn cultists cheered.

Tooth didn’t flinch. His movements were measured, precise. He sidestepped another powerful blow, his footwork keeping him just out of reach. Raltor pressed forward, swinging again and again, each attack meant to crush and overwhelm.

Tooth weaved between the strikes, parrying when he had to, dodging when he could. The crowd fell silent.



They had expected Raltor to end this quickly. But the longer the fight lasted, the clearer it became— Raltor was strong. But Tooth was faster.

The flamberge swung wide—Raltor overcommitted. Tooth saw his opening. With lightning speed, he sidestepped, slamming the pommel of his sword into Raltor's helmet, stunning him. Then—a single, clean slash. Tooth's blade cut across Raltor's thigh, slicing deep through armor and flesh.

Raltor let out a roar of pain, stumbling forward onto one knee, blood staining the cathedral steps. The Temple Knights stood tall.

The Golden Dawn cultists whispered in disbelief. Tooth pointed his sword at Raltor's throat. "Yield."

But before the words left Raltor's lips, chaos erupted. The Golden Dawn cultists broke the sacred truce. One charged forward, dagger raised. A spear flew through the air, impaling the cultist's shield, stopping him in his tracks—Zuba's throw. Another cultist drew his blade, lunging for Tooth.

Uruk tackled him mid-stride, slamming him into one of the cathedral's stone pillars. The steps descended into violence. Swords clashed. Fists met flesh. Blood splattered against sacred stone.

Frold, seeing a wounded monk collapse, moved swiftly, pulling the young warrior out of harm's way while swinging his spear at an advancing cultist. Tooth found himself surrounded, two cultists striking at him from both sides.

He ducked low, slicing one's knee open before twisting his blade into the gut of the second attacker.

Zuba, ever composed, parried an incoming strike with his forearm, grabbing his opponent by the throat. With one powerful motion, he slammed the cultist onto the stone floor, knocking him unconscious.

The brawl raged, warriors grappling, blades flashing.

Then, the cathedral priests intervened.

A loud, booming voice cut through the battle.

"Enough! This is holy ground!"

The city guard rushed in, swords drawn, forcing the two factions apart.

The Golden Dawn cultists retreated, dragging Raltor with them. But before they vanished into the night, their preacher turned, his eyes burning with hatred.

"This is not over."

Tooth wiped blood from his cheek.

“Good.”

Back at the monastery, the warriors of the Temple Knights nursed their wounds. The Grand Cathedral, once a symbol of peace, had been defiled with blood. Uruk sat near the fire, grinning despite his bruises. “We left our mark.” Frold placed a cloth over his arm, eyeing the group. “And so did they. They won’t stop.”

Zuba, leaning against the stone wall, studied the flames. “Then neither will we.” Tooth sheathed his sword, his black eyes sharp and unwavering. “The Golden Dawn wanted to see which of us had divine favor.” He chuckled darkly. “Now they know.”

The Temple Knights did not wait for another attack.

They had endured ambushes, assassins, fire, and betrayal. But now, the time for defense was over.

This was war.

And so, as the cold night stretched toward dawn, the Temple Knights gathered in the monastery’s great hall.

Swords were sharpened. Armor was tightened. Shields were strapped onto backs.

Forty warriors stood, black-cloaked figures in the flickering torchlight, their faces grim, their eyes hardened by months of bloodshed.

Tooth stood at the front, his twin swords resting against his shoulders.

"Tonight, we march underground." His voice was low, deadly. "We rise with the sun and drown it in their blood."

Uruk grinned, rolling his shoulders. “Time to burn out the rot.”

Zuba’s claws tightened around the hilt of his sword. “They tried to erase us.” He met Tooth’s gaze. “Now we erase them.”

Frold let out a slow breath, gripping his spear. “No more warnings. No more truces.”

The recruits stood ready, disciplined warriors forged in battle, clad in steel and faith.

Then, with weapons in hand, the Temple Knights descended into the tunnels beneath Runecald.

The sewers and tunnels beneath the city were old, their stone walls damp, their air heavy with the scent of mildew and rot.

The Temple Knights moved in silence, their boots barely making a sound against the wet stone.

Above them, Runecald slept. The people would not know what happened until it was over.

As they neared the Golden Dawn headquarters, the distant flicker of torchlight marked an underground passage leading to the enemy's sanctum.

Tooth raised a clawed hand, signaling for the warriors to halt.

Through the dim torchlight, figures in gold-stitched robes patrolled the passage ahead.

The first blade struck before a single alarm could be raised. The Temple Knights attacked.

They breached the Golden Dawn headquarters as the first light of dawn streaked across the sky.

A massive wooden temple stood at the center of their compound, its gold-painted walls gleaming in the faint light. Inside, seventy cultists, warriors, and priests gathered, unaware of the storm about to break.

Then—the doors crashed open. The Temple Knights poured in like a flood of black-cloaked shadows.

The battle began.

Swords clashed. Axes bit into flesh. The Golden Dawn warriors scrambled to fight back, but they were not ready.

Tooth leapt into the fray first, his twin blades carving through a cultist's ribs before spinning to slice another across the throat. Blood sprayed the temple walls.

Uruk waded into battle like a war god, his sword hacking through a zealot's shoulder, splitting him nearly in half. He grabbed another by the throat and slammed him against a pillar, crushing bone.

Zuba moved like a shadow, his blade precise, his magic deadly. A cultist lunged with a spear—Zuba caught it mid-air, twisted it, and drove it into its owner's gut.

Frold's spear pierced through two men at once, their bodies jerking before they fell lifelessly to the floor.

The Golden Dawn fought desperately. Priests chanted incantations, hurling fire and divine light. A flaming spear flew toward the ranks of the Temple Knights—Zuba raised his hand. The fire froze mid-air, then turned back on its caster, incinerating the cultist who had thrown it.

The Golden Dawn's enforcers clashed with the monks, their greatswords meeting shields, their daggers seeking flesh.

One of the cultists charged at Tooth, his flamberge arcing downward. Tooth dodged, rolled beneath the blade, and rammed his sword upward—The blade slipped beneath the man's ribs, piercing his heart.

The Temple Knights were ruthless.

Frold's warriors held the stairways, pushing back the cultists with shields and spears. Uruk snapped a man's arm in half before burying his sword in his gut. Zuba sent a wave of fire rolling across the battlefield, setting robes ablaze.

A Golden Dawn champion, clad in gold-plated armor, swung a massive war hammer toward Frold—

Frold ducked under the strike and drove his spear through the man's visor, piercing his skull.

The Golden Dawn was breaking. A cultist priest shrieked from the altar, raising his staff.

Tooth threw a dagger, catching the man in the throat. The priest collapsed, his lifeblood spilling over the altar steps.

The battle lasted an hour.

When it was over, the Golden Dawn lay dead. Seventy bodies strewn across their defiled temple. The Temple Knights stood victorious, their cloaks heavy with blood and sweat. But it was not enough. This place would not stand.

Tooth wiped the blood from his cheek, turning toward the wooden temple. "Burn it."

Uruk grinned. "With pleasure."

The Temple Knights shattered oil jars against the temple walls. Zuba lifted his hand. With a single whispered incantation, he snapped his fingers. Flames erupted.

The fire roared, licking up the walls, consuming everything. The Golden Dawn temple became an inferno, its roof collapsing inward, its wooden beams splintering beneath the heat. The flames spread. The fire leapt to the nearby houses, climbing across rooftops.

By the time the city guard arrived, the sky was thick with smoke, the streets painted in fire and blood. The Temple Knights stood in the shadows, watching the blaze. The Golden Dawn was no more.

As the first rays of morning light pierced through the smoke-filled sky, the people of Runecald awoke to a new city. A city where the Golden Dawn was nothing but ash.

The Temple Knights had painted the dawn in blood, and the rising sun bore witness to their vengeance. Their message was clear: The Temple Knights did not kneel. The Temple Knights did not break. And those who sought to erase them would be erased in turn.

The Iron Keep loomed over Runecald, its black stone towers piercing the sky, banners of noble houses fluttering in the wind. Beyond its massive iron gates, the royal court awaited—the domain of King Edric Vaelthorn III, a ruler known for his ruthless cunning and unshakable grip on power.

The summons had come at dawn.

A royal courier had arrived at the Temple Knights' monastery, bearing a sealed decree from the throne.

The message was clear:

The king demands your presence.

And so, the Temple Knights' leadership gathered, donning their finest armor, their cloaks emblazoned with the Black Hand and Sword.

The Golden Dawn was gone, but now a greater challenge loomed before them.

For the first time, they were not facing an enemy in the streets.

They were walking into the den of kings.

The throne room was vast, its walls adorned with tapestries of battles long past, banners of noble families draping from towering columns.

Golden chandeliers bathed the chamber in flickering light, reflecting off the polished marble floor.

At the far end of the hall, seated upon the Throne of Vaelthorn, was King Edric III.

He was a man of cold calculation, his dark hair streaked with silver, his piercing green eyes sharp with scrutiny.

He was dressed in black and crimson, his hands resting lightly on the golden armrests of his throne.

Beside him stood noble lords and advisors, draped in silks and furs, their gazes filled with curiosity—and suspicion.

Flanking the chamber, the King's elite swordsmen stood at attention, their hands resting upon the hilts of their gilded longswords.

As the Temple Knights approached, silence fell over the court.

The king's eyes flickered over them, then he spoke.

King Edric: *"The cult is dead, yet I hear whispers in my own halls—whispers that the Temple Knights grow bolder, that you speak of a new order in the city. I would remind you that there is only one order in Runecald. And it is mine."*

The words hung in the air, sharp as a blade.

The Temple Knights did not kneel.

They stood tall before the throne, unbowed, their faces set like stone.

It was Tooth who stepped forward, his black eyes unreadable, his swords resting at his sides.

Tooth: *"We did what your city guards could not. We fought in the streets while your nobles feasted. And now you would have us kneel?"*

A murmur spread through the court, nobles exchanging glances.

King Edric's jaw tightened.

King Edric: *"I would have you serve."*

The king leaned forward, his fingers tapping lightly against the armrest of his throne.

King Edric: *"You have become a power in this city. A power I did not create. That will not stand."*

Uruk crossed his arms, scoffing.

Uruk: *"And if we refuse?"*

The room tensed.

King Edric did not hesitate.

King Edric: *"Then you will be seen as rebels. And rebels are crushed."*

The King's elite swordsmen stiffened, their hands shifting slightly on their weapons.

The Temple Knights did not move.

It was Zuba who spoke next, his voice low and steady.

Zuba: *"We swore an oath to the people, not to a throne."*

The nobles whispered among themselves. Some nodded in quiet agreement, while others looked on with disdain.

The King's fingers curled into a fist.

King Edric: *"Then you are divided from the throne. And a city divided cannot stand."*

The weight of the words hung in the chamber.

The Temple Knights had made their stance clear.

And so had the King.

The King's offer was refused.

The audience ended with no formal declaration of war, but the air was thick with unspoken threats.

As the Temple Knights turned to leave, King Edric's voice echoed once more.

King Edric: *"Be careful, warriors. Not all battles are fought with steel. Some are won with ink and whispers. And you are not the only ones who know how to fight."*

Tooth did not look back.

But as they stepped out of the Iron Keep, he could feel the eyes of the court upon them, watching, waiting. The Golden Dawn had been a war of blood. But this? This was a war of kings.

The Council Hall of Runecald was a place of public judgment, where nobles, clergy, and merchants gathered to settle disputes and hear decrees from the throne.

But tonight, it was a battleground—not of swords, but of words, whispers, and poison.

The noble houses loyal to King Edric had come prepared, their accusations woven like daggers, sharp and deadly.

From the moment the Temple Knights entered the council chamber, the air was hostile.

At the far end of the hall, a dozen nobles in crimson and gold robes sat upon elevated seats, their expressions cold, their eyes brimming with disdain.

King Edric himself was absent, yet his presence lingered in every word spoken.

A tall, gaunt nobleman, Lord Varek, stood first, his voice calm but brimming with venom.

"These warriors—these so-called knights—are not defenders of the people. They are butchers. They have exceeded their authority, executing nobles during their crusade against the Golden Dawn."

A murmur ran through the gathered lords and clergy.

Tooth, standing at the forefront of the Temple Knights' representatives, narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

Another noble, Lady Orsana, clad in silver and blue, sneered.

"We have received reports that the Temple Knights are hoarding weapons—arming the common folk for war. That they train in secret, preparing to challenge the throne itself."

Uruk scoffed, crossing his arms. "We train because the city bleeds. While you sit here sipping wine, we fight."

Another voice rose—a merchant, one of the king's chosen informants.

"I saw it myself," he declared, stepping forward. "Silver meant for the city guard was taken—stolen by these 'knights.' They use it to fund their rise to power."

Lies.

Every word dripped with deceit, a carefully orchestrated trap.

And the council chamber swallowed it whole.

The accusations mounted, noble houses nodding in agreement.

Then, the final decree fell.

A priest, clad in red robes embroidered with the king's sigil, stood.

"The throne demands a formal investigation into the Temple Knights," he announced, his voice calm yet absolute. "You will stand trial. The crown will determine if your order is guilty of treason."

The Temple Knights remained silent. They knew what this was. Not justice. Not truth. A political noose tightening around their necks.

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Another voice rose—a merchant, one of the king’s chosen informants.

"I saw it myself," he declared, stepping forward. "Gold meant for the city guard was taken—stolen by these ‘knights.’ They use it to fund their rise to power."

Lies.

Every word dripped with deceit, a carefully orchestrated trap.

And the council chamber swallowed it whole.

The accusations mounted, noble houses nodding in agreement.

Then, the final decree fell.

A priest, clad in red robes embroidered with the king’s sigil, stood.

“The throne demands a formal investigation into the Temple Knights,” he announced, his voice calm yet absolute. “You will stand trial. The crown will determine if your order is guilty of treason.”

The Temple Knights remained silent. They knew what this was. Not justice. Not truth. A political noose tightening around their necks.

That night, as the Temple Knights’ representatives left the Council Hall, the air was thick with tension.

The noble houses had spoken.

The king had set his pieces in motion.

And now, he would make his move.

The streets were quiet, the flickering lanterns casting long shadows across the narrow alleyways.

Zuba walked beside Tooth, his black eyes sharp, his hand resting on the hilt of his blade.

Frold trailed behind, his spear slung across his back.

Uruk walked at their flank, his knuckles tight around the handle of his sword.

They were not alone.

A whistle—a single sharp note—cut through the air.

Then—the first crossbow bolt struck.

It hissed from the rooftops, embedding itself in the cobblestone at Tooth's feet.

The second shot struck one of their knights behind them—a piercing scream as the man collapsed, blood pooling beneath him.

"AMBUSH!"

Masked assassins descended from the alleys, cloaked figures in black and gold, their daggers glistening with poison.

The Temple Knights drew steel. The streets of Runecald became a battlefield.

Tooth ducked beneath another crossbow shot, rolling into the shadows before springing forward, swords flashing.

The first assassin barely had time to react—Tooth's blade plunged into his ribs, twisting mercilessly.

Zuba caught a dagger mid-strike, wrenching his attacker's wrist before slicing his throat open with a fluid motion. Uruk clashed with two at once, his brutal strength sending one flying against a stone wall, his sword carving through the other's gut. Frold fought defensively, keeping his footing steady as he blocked a flurry of dagger strikes, countering with precise spear thrusts.

The Temple Knights fought fiercely, but the assassins were relentless.

A knight—one of their commanders—let out a choked gasp. A dagger buried itself deep in his back. Blood spilled onto the cobblestones. Tooth turned, eyes wide, just in time to see the commander fall.

Rage surged through his veins. The assassin responsible tried to flee—

Tooth lunged after him, grabbing him by the hood, slamming him against the alley wall.

"WHO SENT YOU?!" Tooth snarled.

The assassin coughed blood, grinning despite the pain.

"The crown does not tolerate rivals."

Tooth slit his throat.

By the time the surviving assassins fled into the night, the Temple Knights stood victorious—but at a cost.

One of their commanders lay dead. The message was clear. King Edric was not going to wait for a trial. By morning, a formal decree was issued, nailed to every street corner, proclaimed by heralds in every square.

“By order of King Edric Vaelthorn III: The Temple Knights are hereby commanded to stand down, relinquish their arms, and submit to the authority of the crown. Those who refuse shall be considered traitors.”

The city teetered on the brink. The Temple Knights were outlaws. The throne had cast its judgment. And Runecald braced itself for war.

The Cathedral of Saints was the holiest place in Runecald—a monument to the gods, a place where kings were crowned, heroes were buried, and peace was meant to reign.

But tonight, the cathedral would be defiled.

The air was heavy with tension as the Temple Knights entered its towering halls. Their black cloaks brushed against the marble floor, their swords strapped to their sides. The candles flickered, the stained-glass windows casting eerie colors across the stone pillars.

At the far end of the cathedral, beneath the grand golden arch, stood the king’s envoys—men in royal finery, flanked by armored swordsmen.

This was meant to be a negotiation.

The King’s Envoy: “*You stand accused of treason.*” The envoy’s voice echoed through the hallowed chamber. “And yet, you demand absolution?”

Tooth’s black eyes narrowed. “We demand truth. Your king spreads lies, sends assassins, and calls us the traitors?”

Uruk stepped forward, his arms crossed. “We fought in the streets while you cowards whispered in halls.”

Zuba remained silent. His gaze was steel, his presence unshaken.

Zuba: “*Withdraw the accusations. Deliver us the assassins who killed our brother. Prove that this city still values justice.*”

The king’s envoy smiled. The trap was already set.

The King’s Envoy: “*Your order is finished. Surrender your arms, accept exile, and perhaps you will be spared.*”

Silence. Then—the doors slammed shut. From the galleries above, the king’s hidden guards moved. Steel slid from scabbards.

Zuba’s eyes hardened. “We are betrayed by these maggots.”

The cathedral exploded into violence.

The first arrow flew—aimed for Tooth's throat.

He twisted, dodging just in time, drawing both blades as the clash of steel rang through the sacred halls.

Uruk roared, crashing into the royal guards, his sword cleaving through mail and flesh.

The Temple Knights fought back, their weapons drawn, their oaths forgotten in the face of treachery.

A monk was cut down, his blood splattering across the altar.

Zuba moved with deadly precision, parrying a spear thrust before setting his attacker ablaze with a whispered incantation. The flames licked up the soldier's armor as he screamed, falling to the marble floor.

A guard lunged at Froid, his sword arcing for a killing blow— Froid blocked with his spear, countering with a swift thrust through the man's gut. The cathedral became a war zone. The golden tapestries that lined the walls were soaked in crimson.

One by one, the knights fell back, bloodied but unbroken.

Tooth ducked beneath a wide swing, rolling forward and driving his dagger into a guard's exposed ribs. Uruk grabbed a royal soldier by the throat, smashing his head into the stone pillar until he stopped moving. Zuba, breathing heavily, dragged a wounded knight toward the back exit. "We cannot hold!"

Zuba's voice cut through the chaos.

"Retreat!"

With shields raised and weapons flashing, the Temple Knights forced their way toward the exit.

The royal guards pressed forward, their numbers overwhelming, but the knights fought with the ferocity of cornered beasts.

As they reached the side doors, Uruk shouldered through them, clearing a path into the cold night.

The Temple Knights spilled into the streets, dragging their wounded, leaving their dead.

Behind them, the Cathedral of Saints lay defiled—its once-holy halls now a graveyard of blood and bodies.

But they had survived. By the time midnight came, the decree was announced throughout the city. The Temple Knights were no longer rebels. They were outlaws. The king's heralds stood at every street corner, reading the decree aloud to the gathered crowds.

“By order of King Edric Vaelthorn III, the Temple Knights are to be hunted as traitors. Their monastery is seized, their banners burned. Those who aid them shall share their fate.”

That night, the royal army stormed the monastery. They smashed the doors open, looted its halls, and burned its banners. By dawn, the Temple Knights had no home, no refuge.

But they did not fall. They retreated into the shadows, underground tunnels, the ruins beyond the city. And as the city of Runecald awoke, whispers spread through the streets.

The common folk murmured of betrayal, of false kings and fallen warriors.

The Temple Knights were not gone. They were becoming legend.

The Temple Knights had been cast out. Their monastery was burned, their banners torn down, and the King’s decree named them traitors.

But the streets of Runecald whispered their name.

And now, the city would burn for them.

Dressed in ragged cloaks, slipping through the alleyways and marketplace crowds, the Temple Knights spread the truth.

They spoke in hushed voices at taverns, in murmurs to merchants, in whispers to beggars and blacksmiths.

"The King is a traitor."

"He sent assassins in the night, murdered those who defended the city, and now rules with a blade to your throat."

"You, the people, are the army."

"If you do not rise, he will grind you beneath his boots."

"But if you take up arms—if you stand together—he will fall."

The nobles and the army had ruled for too long. The people had suffered under high taxes, watched their sons die in royal wars, seen their city turned into a battlefield.

Now, they were offered a choice. And they chose war.

In the dead of night, the Temple Knights moved through the underground tunnels, a network of passages beneath the city once used by smugglers and thieves. They did not travel alone. Hundreds of Runecald’s people followed, blacksmiths, former soldiers, dockworkers, and merchants—all those who had suffered under the crown.

The tunnels led beneath the Royal Armory, a fortified structure holding enough weapons to arm thousands. The guards were expecting a siege. They were not expecting an ambush from

below. The Temple Knights burst from the tunnels, their blades flashing in the dim torchlight. The battle was swift.

The King's soldiers fought bravely, but they were outnumbered, overwhelmed by the sheer fury of the people. Within an hour, the armory was theirs. Blades were distributed. Axes, spears, swords, and shields—Runecald's citizens were no longer just angry. Now, they were armed.

As dawn rose, so did the city. The King's forces patrolled the streets, expecting a few riots. What they found was an army.

Barricades rose in the market district. Blacksmiths and masons turned their hammers into weapons, former soldiers donned rusted armor, hunters strung their bows, and mages prepared their spells.

The King's banners still hung, but the streets no longer belonged to him. By midday, the first riots exploded. By evening, the city was a war zone. It was a bloodbath.

Thousands clashed in the streets, the city engulfed in flames. The King's army fought fiercely—trained, disciplined, armored. But the people fought with fury.

Every alley, every rooftop, every marketplace became a battlefield.

The Temple Knights led the charge, striking where the enemy was weakest. Tooth carved through soldiers, his twin blades a blur of steel and blood. Uruk crashed into the enemy ranks, his strength unmatched, breaking shields and splitting skulls. Zuba commanded fire, hurling flames into the ranks of the King's archers, setting them ablaze as they screamed. Frold fought alongside the people, his spear piercing through armored knights as he rallied the common folk to strike harder.

The streets ran red. The King's soldiers began to break. The people pushed forward, unstoppable, relentless. The noble houses barricaded themselves in their estates. The barricades were broken.

The nobles were slaughtered in their halls, their wealth ripped from their hands. By midnight, the castle was surrounded. By dawn, the King's banners fell.

The castle doors were smashed open. The King's elite swordsmen stood in the throne room, forming a final defense. They fought to the last man. The Temple Knights cut them down.

And then, at last, the Throne Room stood open. The King sat upon his golden seat, watching as his city burned. His eyes met Tooth's.

Tooth stepped forward, sword in hand.

"This one was won with fire and blood, not ink and whispers."

With one swift motion, Tooth drove his blade through the King's chest.

The War for Runecald was over. The Temple Knights stood victorious. And the city belonged to its people once more.

The battle was over.

The streets of Runecald, once soaked in the blood of the fallen, were now cleansed, rebuilt, and restored.

For weeks, the people of the city gathered corpses, burning the bodies of the king's soldiers and giving proper burials to their own. The stench of war faded, replaced by the scent of new life—the smell of fresh-cut stone, of newly tilled earth, of bread baking in the markets once more.

Where a tyrant had ruled, a new order had risen. And the Temple Knights now held the city in their grasp. The castle, once the heart of King Edric's rule, now belonged to the people and the Temple Knights.

The golden banners of the Vaelthorn dynasty were torn down, their sigils burned in the public square. In their place, new banners hung—deep black cloth, embroidered with the sigil of the Temple Order: the Black Hand and Sword.

The royal treasury, filled with hoarded wealth stolen from the city's people, was taken over. No longer the hoard of a king, the treasury now served the Order and the citizens of Runecald.

In the castle's great hall, where nobles once whispered and feasted, the Temple Council was formed.

The great wooden table was no longer a place for royal decrees.

Now, it was where the leaders of the Temple Knights gathered to decide the future of the city.

Zuba stood before them, his black eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

Zuba: "We began in the shadows, hunted like outlaws. But now, we rule in the open. Runecald belongs to the Order."

Tooth leaned against the stone wall, his swords hanging at his sides.

Tooth: "And what shall we do with it?"

Uruk grinned, crossing his arms.

Uruk: "We do what we have always done—make it stronger."

Frold nodded.

Frold: "No more kings. No more corruption. The city will not serve a crown—it will serve discipline, strength, and faith."

The others around the table murmured in agreement.

The Temple Knights would not become the rulers the people had once feared.

They would become something more.

With the castle secured, the Temple Knights turned their gaze toward the Cathedral of Saints. The greatest holy site in Runecald, where kings were crowned and nobles prayed for power, was no longer a place of empty faith.

The priests who had served the throne were cast out, their luxuries stripped away.

The Temple Knights entered the grand halls, their boots echoing against the marble floors. The golden ornaments were removed, the stained-glass windows depicting the old kings shattered. And in their place, the banners of the Order were hung.

The Cathedral of Saints was no longer a house of noble faith. It was now the headquarters of the Temple Order. Here, the Knights would train. Here, the laws of the new Order would be written. Here, the future of Runecald would be shaped.

With the fall of the monarchy, thousands flocked to the Temple Knights.

Former soldiers, mercenaries, blacksmiths, scholars, and peasants alike sought to join the ranks of the new rulers.

New smaller temple houses were opened across the city, each serving as a beacon of discipline, strength, and faith.

The Order did not rule with greed or fear. They fed the hungry, they healed the sick, and they trained the weak. Libraries were opened, filled with books of war, wisdom, and knowledge. The ways of the Temple Knights were taught to all who sought guidance.

The streets of Runecald, once filled with riots and war, now carried the chanting of warrior monks, the clash of steel in training grounds, and the hum of disciplined faith.

The city was no longer a kingdom.

It was a stronghold of the Order.

And from here, the Temple Knights would not just rule.

They would expand.

One night, in the quiet of the Temple's high tower, Zuba sat at a wooden desk. Before him, a raven perched, its black eyes watching. Dipping a quill into ink, Zuba wrote upon a scroll of parchment.

"To Elric, Grandmaster of the Order,

The Temple Order has been established in Runecald. We started with a small monastery, but as the events unfolded, we now hold the entire city. The king is dead. His treasury and his army are ours.

The Cathedral of Saints is our headquarters, our banners hang over its walls. The people follow us. They train, they fight, they serve. We are no longer a hidden faction. We are the law.

The Order is growing. And this is only the beginning." Rolling the parchment tightly, Zuba tied it to the raven's leg. The bird cawed softly before taking flight, disappearing into the night. Tooth stepped up beside him, watching the raven vanish into the sky.

The raven arrived at dawn, its dark wings slicing through the early morning mist, landing atop the stone parapet of the great hall.

The Temple Council had gathered, as they did each morning, their voices echoing through the vast chamber that had once served as the King's court.

Tooth was leaning over the grand table, scanning ledgers and account scrolls, his sharp claws tapping absently against the parchment.

Uruk was sprawled out in a heavy wooden chair, one boot resting on the table, chewing lazily on a piece of dried meat.

Zuba stood by the tall stained-glass window, arms crossed, his black eyes lost in thought as he gazed over the city below.

Frold was scribbling into a fresh tome, his quill scratching rapidly across the parchment.

When the raven landed, it cocked its head, waiting.

Tooth untied the scroll from its leg, unrolling it and reading Elrics words aloud.

"Work well done. Our Temple is expanding, and our reach has spread beyond expectation. Secure the lands, strengthen the army. Keep good will with the people, and let the Order's teachings guide them. Spread the word among the masses. Recruit new blood to our ranks. The Order must grow. There is still much to be done."

The room fell silent. For the first time in many moons, the war was over. Now came the work of ruling. Uruk let out a low chuckle, tossing a bone onto the table. "Secure the lands, strengthen the army, spread the word, keep the people happy—" He grinned, raising an eyebrow. "Sounds like a lot of work."

Zuba turned from the window, his expression unreadable.

"We knew this was coming. Victory was the easy part. What comes next—this will define the Order for generations."

Frold nodded, setting his quill down.

"We must act carefully. The people are with us now, but faith is a fire—it must be tended, or it burns out."

Tooth rolled up the parchment, tossing it onto the table.

"Then let's not waste time."

And so, they began to plan.

That evening, the party gathered in the castle's great hall, seated around the long wooden table once used by the King and his nobles. Now, it was theirs.

The cellars of the castle held wine older than most men, bottles of rich crimson, golden ambers, and deep violet shades, their corks aged and wax-sealed. Tonight, the knights drank as rulers.

Tooth, ever the accountant, had pulled several scrolls and ledgers onto the table, quill in hand, as he began calculating the treasury. "By my count," Tooth muttered, "the royal treasury held enough gold and silver to fund an army three times the size of the King's."

He tapped the parchment, his tail flicking.

"If we use this wisely—if we invest in weapons, armor, fortifications, and recruitment—Runecald will never fall again."

Uruk took a long swig of wine, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "And yet, here you sit, counting coins while the rest of us drink."

Tooth didn't look up. "Because someone has to."

Frold laughed, raising his goblet. "Let the rat do his work, Uruk. We don't want to wake up tomorrow and find we spent the treasury on ale and roasted boar."

Uruk smiled. "No promises."

Zuba, who had been silent most of the night, finally spoke.

"We cannot just prepare for war. We must build."** His golden eyes flickered in the candlelight.**

"Temples in every district. Schools to train our warriors and scholars alike. A city run not by greed, but by strength and discipline. The Order must become more than swords and banners."

Tooth nodded absently, still scratching calculations onto his parchment.

"We'll need blacksmiths, builders, merchants—all under our banner."

Frold leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“And the teachings.”

The others turned to him.

Frold gestured to the parchment before him, a fresh tome of thick parchment bound in leather.

“We must ensure that our ways are known beyond Runecald. We must write, record, and teach.”

Zuba lifted a brow. “You’re writing a book?”

Frold smiled. “A book? No, I am writing *the* book.”

The others exchanged glances.

“The core of our Order,” Frold continued, “must be written down and spread. Every warrior, every student, every man and woman who follows the Black Hand and Sword must know our teachings. Our history. Our code.”

Uruk poured himself another goblet of wine, grinning. “You always were the scholar.”

Frold chuckled. “And you, Uruk, were always the brute.”

Uruk raised his goblet. “And yet, here we sit together, rulers of a city.”

Tooth exhaled, finishing his accounting for the night. “Not just a city. A kingdom in all but name.”

Silence fell over the room as the weight of those words settled. Then, Zuba spoke again, his voice quiet but firm. “Then let us rule it well.”

The next few weeks saw the foundations of a new rule.

Gold from the treasury was used wisely— Weapons were crafted for new recruits. Temples and schools were established in every district. Libraries were opened, filled with knowledge of both war and wisdom. The sick and poor were cared for, ensuring the people's loyalty. The army was drilled, their discipline sharpened to perfection.

And Frold’s book, *The Way of the Temple Knights*, was copied and distributed among the people, ensuring their teachings would not fade.

The Temple Order had begun with a single monastery. Now, it ruled an entire city.

The Great Hall of the Citadel stood as the heart of Runecald’s new rule. Where once kings and nobles feasted and plotted, now warriors and scholars gathered, forging the laws of a new era.

The old banners, gold-stitched remnants of the fallen monarchy, were ripped from the stone walls, their silken fabric tossed into the fire. In their place, new banners hung—black, marked with the sigil of the Temple Knights, the Black Hand and Sword.

The air was thick with the scent of burning wax and parchment, as scribes hunched over wooden desks, quills scratching, recording the birth of a new order.

At the head of the great table, the Grandmasters of the Temple Order sat in council—Zuba, Uruk, Froid, and Tooth, their steel-clad forms casting long shadows over the candlelit chamber.

Before them stood commanders, city officials, and monks, awaiting the first decrees of the new rulers.

Zuba stood first, his black eyes gleaming under the torchlight.

"The war is won, but peace is an illusion." His voice carried through the hall, steady and sharp. "A city without an army is a city waiting to fall."

He turned to the assembled scribes and officials.

"From this day forth, every village under our banner shall send its strongest youth—men and women alike—to train in the ways of the Temple Knights."

A murmur rippled through the hall.

One of the older city officials hesitated. "And those who refuse?"

Zuba's expression was unreadable.

"Then they shall pay the Tax of Steel—gold in place of service."

Tooth, chewing absentmindedly on a dented gauntlet, flicked his ears. "More coin means more steel. More steel means stronger walls and sharper swords. Either way, we win."

The decree was sealed, and the scribes hurried to copy it for public display.

Froid leaned forward, his webbed fingers drumming against the oak table.

"The Order cannot live on discipline alone. Armies march on iron and grain."

He gestured to the trade officials and merchants gathered at the lower end of the hall.

"The mines of Runecald will be placed under direct control of the Temple Knights. Our blacksmiths will no longer forge trinkets for merchants. They will forge weapons, armor, and shields. The foundries will burn without rest."

Uruk let out a low chuckle, kicking his boots up onto the table.

"This city was built on corruption and cowardice," he growled. "It will be reforged in fire and steel."

A black-robed merchant shifted uneasily. "And the farmlands?"

Frold's expression hardened.

"They will be reorganized. The monasteries and armies will be fed first. The city second. Hunger breeds weakness."

Uruk snorted, raising his goblet. "Weakness breeds graves."

The decree was sealed.

The air shifted as Zuba stood once more, his golden eyes reflecting the candlelight.

"We do not only rule with steel."

He glanced toward the map of Runecald and the surrounding lands.

"The faith of the Order must spread. Every village, every crossroads, every city must feel our presence."

He tapped the map, where black sigils were being drawn on key locations.

"New monasteries will be built, serving as both temples and strongholds."

A murmur of uncertainty passed through the assembled leaders.

A scribe, his ink-stained fingers trembling, spoke hesitantly. "Some may resist the faith of the Order."

Zuba's lips curled into the faintest of smiles.

"Then they will learn."

Frold, however, lifted a hand.

"Our rule must be just, or we will be no better than the tyrants we overthrew."

Tooth, still chewing on the metal gauntlet, flicked his tail.

"Hrrm. We need more smiths. More steel. And better stone for my teeth."

Uruk laughed, slamming a fist on the table.

"Then let's get to work."

The decrees were signed, sealed, and sent forth. Messengers rode to the villages, spreading the new laws. In the streets of Runecald, criers read the proclamations aloud, the black banners of the Order flapping against the city walls.

Some welcomed the rule of the Temple Knights. Others feared it. But all understood one thing. The king was dead. And the Temple Order had risen in his place.

Runecald was no longer a kingdom. It was a fortress of faith and war. And its rulers were forged in steel and blood.

The Fields of Valor stretched vast and open beyond the great walls of Runecald—a place once meant for tournaments and royal hunts, now turned into the crucible where warriors were forged.

Banners of the Temple Knights flapped in the cold wind, the sigil of the Black Hand and Sword now recognized as a symbol of discipline and power across the land.

Messengers had ridden far and wide, proclaiming the great call to arms.

And they had come. Peasants, eager to rise above their station. Former soldiers, tired of serving corrupt lords. Mercenaries, drawn by the promise of war and coin. Thousands stood upon the Fields of Valor, some gripping rusted spears, others with nothing but fists and fury. They came to prove themselves. To be made into warriors. Or to be discarded.

At the head of the training grounds, four figures stood atop a raised platform, looking down upon the mass of recruits.

Uruk cracked his knuckles, his tusked grin splitting his face.

"Look at them." He chuckled, "A thousand bodies, but how many warriors?"

Tooth, leaning on a wooden post, flicked his tail, gnawing absently on a steel-plated gauntlet.

"We'll find out soon enough," he muttered.

Zuba, his black eyes sweeping the crowd, spoke calmly.

"Strength alone is nothing. We need discipline. Intelligence. Purpose."

Frold, his arms crossed, nodded.

"An army without faith is just a mob. We will forge them into something greater."

The Temple Knights did not accept weaklings. Only the worthy would remain. And so, the training began. The recruits were divided into groups, each overseen by one of the Temple Lords.

Uruk did not teach with words. He taught with blood. He tossed a war axe into the mud and pointed to two recruits.

"One of you gets to keep it. The other gets to crawl back home."

The two men hesitated. Uruk sighed. Then he grabbed both by the throat and slammed them into the dirt. "You hesitate in battle, you die."

He turned to the rest of the recruits. "Now fight."

Across the Field of Valor, warriors clashed in the dirt, fists meeting flesh, blades meeting shields.

The weak were beaten down. The strong endured. Those who faltered were thrown out. Those who proved themselves were given weapons and sent to the next trial.

Zuba did not care for brawlers. He cared for thinkers. The next trial was not about strength, but survival. Recruits were sent into the nearby forest, given only a dagger and a single waterskin. Their task? Return alive.

They had to navigate traps, evade creatures of the forest, and endure the harsh elements.

Some froze in fear. Some fought blindly and fell into ambushes. But those who adapted, who planned, who outwitted their enemies—they returned, exhausted but victorious. Zuba stood waiting, nodding to the survivors. "You are not beasts. You are warriors. And warriors do not fight without thought."

Those who failed? They were sent to dig trenches, mend armor, and haul stone. An army needed workers as much as it needed swords.

Tooth oversaw the weapons.

A warrior's sword, bow, and armor were extensions of their body.

He watched as recruits fumbled with their blades, some barely able to hold a hilt properly.

Tooth sighed, stepping forward.

"A dull blade kills you before your enemy does."

He grabbed a recruit's sword, inspected it, then snapped the rusted steel in half over his knee.

"Trash. Fix it."

He taught them to sharpen, to oil, to care for their weapons as they would a brother.

And those who failed?

They were not thrown out. They were sent to the forges, to become smiths. Every man and woman had a place in the Order. Even if it was not on the battlefield.

Frold gathered those who sought something beyond the blade. The Order needed priests, healers, scholars. He trained them in alchemy, in the art of bandages and battlefield medicine. "A dead knight wins no wars," he told them.

He taught them the prayers of the Order, the rites of discipline, the chants of battle. A knight's mind must be as strong as their sword. Those who could not fight learned to heal. Those who could not heal learned to read, to write, to teach. Every warrior needed a reason to fight. Faith gave them purpose.

One evening, as the sun set over the Fields of Valor, a group of mercenaries, hardened and scarred from past wars, stepped forward. They had come to join, but not without a challenge. Their leader, a grizzled veteran with a scar down his cheek, smiled. "You monks talk a lot about strength. But can you fight?"

The recruits murmured. Uruk grinned, rolling his shoulders. "You think yourselves warriors?"

The mercenaries laughed. "Better than a bunch of priests in armor."

The Fields of Valor went silent. Then Uruk stepped forward. "Prove it."

Uruk fought three at once, bare-knuckled. The first charged him—Uruk sidestepped and sent his knee into the man's ribs, breaking them instantly. The second swung at his head—Uruk caught the fist, twisted, and snapped his arm. The third tried to run.

Uruk grabbed him by the back of the head and slammed him into the dirt. The mercenaries did not laugh anymore.

The road to the Deep Mines of Vordrakk was long and treacherous, winding through the cold, barren lands beneath the shadow of the mountains. The path was lined with jagged stone and deep ravines, remnants of the ancient world when the gods carved the mountains with their fury. The mines, sprawling deep beneath the earth, had been the lifeblood of Runecald long before the Temple Knights took power. Iron and steel flowed from its depths like blood from an open wound, feeding the forges that armed warriors and sustained kingdoms. Now, it was theirs.

Yet whispers of rebellion had reached their ears.

Seated atop their warhorses, clad in heavy armor, the Grandmasters of the Order rode with a retinue of fifty knights, their black banners fluttering in the freezing wind. They did not send messengers or lesser lords to settle this dispute. They had crushed a king, toppled a kingdom, and reformed a city in their image. They would not be defied by mere miners and traitors lurking in the dark.

Zuba rode at the front, his cloak draped over his shoulders, his sword resting easily at his hip. His black eyes scanned the rocky terrain ahead, ever wary of an ambush. "If there is rebellion here, we will root it out. The mines must serve the Order, not the ghosts of dead kings."

Uruk spat onto the ground and adjusted the grip on his reins. "Rebellions grow where weakness is allowed to fester. We'll tear out the rot, plant something stronger in its place."

He grinned, baring his sharp teeth. "And if they resist, they'll find the pickaxe is a poor match for a sword."

Frold adjusted the straps of his riding gloves, his thoughts heavier. "We cannot build a kingdom atop the bones of the people. We need their steel, their hands. We kill what must be killed, but we turn the rest to our cause."

Tooth gnawed absently on the handle of his dagger, his tail flicking with idle amusement. "Or we just collapse the tunnels on them and dig new ones. Saves time."

The knights behind them remained silent, disciplined warriors who had seen enough war to know that their leaders were not men to be questioned.

The entrance to Vordrakk yawned ahead, a gaping maw of jagged rock and torchlight leading into the earth.

The Deep Mines awaited.

The moment they entered the mining camp, the air felt thick with defiance. Miners, covered in soot and sweat, stopped their work, their calloused hands tightening around pickaxes and hammers as the Grandmasters and their knights dismounted. Dozens of workers stood in silent defiance, their eyes burning with something between hatred and fear.

At the center of the camp stood the mine's foreman, an aging man with a broad chest and a face carved from stone. His name was Vargis Dren, and he had once been a loyal man to King Edric. He had kept his position because he was useful, but his allegiance was a question left unanswered.

He stepped forward, his face unreadable. "A rare sight, seeing the new lords dirty their boots with the dust of the mines. To what do we owe the honor?"

Zuba's gaze was cold. "Your mines are failing. We sent a quota. You are not meeting it."

Vargis wiped his hands on his tunic, his lips curling in something that might have been a smile. "Miners aren't slaves. You demand more steel, more gold, but men don't work faster on command. They need food, rest, coin."

Frold stepped forward, folding his arms. "And they will have those things. But the Order will not tolerate stagnation. This mine serves the Temple Knights now, and we expect loyalty."

A murmur spread among the miners, a few stepping forward more boldly. "Loyalty to a cause that feeds us scraps?" one of them growled. "If you want us to work harder, then pay us what we're worth."

Uruk tilted his head. "And if I split you in half, will the others work faster out of gratitude?"

The silence that followed was thick with tension.

Zuba raised a hand, silencing Uruk before the situation turned to immediate bloodshed. "There will be no rebellion here today. We will increase the wages of those who work

diligently. Those who refuse to work will find themselves given a choice: work, or be cast out to the wilderness where no man survives alone."

Vargis narrowed his eyes. "And if we say no?"

Zuba glanced at Uruk. "Then we replace you."

Uruk did not wait for permission.

The orc drew his blade in a flash of steel and drove it through Vargis's gut.

The miners gasped, stepping back in shock, but Uruk simply let the body fall to the dirt, wiping his blade on his cloak. He turned to the crowd, voice calm but iron-hard. "You work for the Temple Knights now. You take the coin you're given, or you find out what it's like to die with empty hands."

There was no more argument.

The next foreman was chosen within the hour—a man loyal to the Order, one who would keep the peace and ensure the steel flowed.

As the Temple Knights inspected the mine, Tooth's keen nose caught something strange in the tunnels—a scent that did not belong. He flicked his tail, chewing on a pickaxe absentmindedly as he sniffed again. "We're not alone down here," he muttered.

Zuba's expression darkened. "How many?" Tooth's ears twitched. "Enough to cause trouble."

What they found in the lower tunnels confirmed their fears. A hidden chamber, dug in secret, filled with weapons—swords, shields, and crude armor. This was no mere grumbling workforce. This was an organized resistance.

They did not have time to prepare. A war horn echoed through the cavern. From the darkness, rebel miners charged, axes raised, their numbers more than expected.

The Temple Knights met them with steel. Uruk led the charge, his greatsword carving through flesh like paper. He fought like a beast unchained, cleaving limbs, breaking skulls, his laughter like thunder in the dark. Zuba moved like a shadow, slipping past enemy strikes, cutting down the rebel leader in single combat—a precise slash across the throat that ended the rebellion with one clean motion. Frold rallied the knights, ensuring that those wounded were tended to, that the fight did not descend into mindless slaughter. Tooth, ever the opportunist, saw a group of rebels fleeing into a side tunnel. He bared his fangs, flicking his tail. "Not today." With a single, powerful kick, he sent the support beams crashing down, sealing the tunnel and burying them alive.

When the dust settled, the rebels lay broken in pools of their own blood.

The mines belonged to the Temple Knights.

By the time the Grandmasters left Vordrakk, the mine was not just a source of wealth—it was a fortress. Knights now stood guard at every entrance, ensuring no rebellion would take root

again. The miners, though still weary, worked harder than before, their hands driven not by fear alone, but by the certainty that the Temple Knights rewarded loyalty and punished treachery. The forges of Runecald would burn hotter than ever.

The Descent

The sun shone high over Runecald, its golden light casting long shadows through the streets. The people moved about their business in the markets and squares, the sounds of merchants haggling and blacksmiths hammering steel ringing through the air. But then, the light shifted.

A shadow, vast and terrible, stretched across the rooftops, swallowing the streets in a growing darkness. The bells of the Temple Knights' Citadel rang out, but not for prayer, nor for war. The air became thick with an unnatural heat, the scent of sulfur and burning stone creeping through the city like an omen.

Then came the roar.

It rolled through the sky like an earthquake, a bellowing fury that shattered glass and sent birds screaming from the rooftops. The people of Runecald froze in horror. Some fled, others fell to their knees, whispering prayers to gods long silent. The more foolish of them stood still, watching with wide, disbelieving eyes as a monstrous shape emerged from the clouds.

From the peaks beyond Runecald, it came—a dragon, vast and ancient, its wings as wide as city streets, its scales blackened like burned steel, its eyes molten gold.

It descended, each beat of its colossal wings scattering dust, debris, and loose tiles from the roofs. The sheer force of its arrival cracked the great stone steps of the citadel, and with a final gust of wind, the dragon landed.

The city trembled.

The knights of the Temple Order had already gathered. The Grandmasters stood at the base of the citadel's great stairs, their hands resting on the pommels of their swords, their expressions grim. Archers lined the walls above, their bows drawn, though none dared loose a shot.

For a long moment, the dragon did not attack.

Instead, it lowered its massive head, staring at them with unblinking golden eyes. Smoke curled from its nostrils, rising into the air like the breath of a forge.

Then it spoke.

Its voice was a thing of grinding stone and rolling thunder, deep and ancient, carrying the weight of centuries, if not millennia.

"Knights of Runecald..." the dragon rumbled, its words stretching into a deep growl. "You carry something that is not yours."

The air crackled with unseen power, as if the beast's very presence disturbed the balance of the world.

Zuba stepped forward, unflinching. His black eyes, sharp and unwavering, locked onto the great dragon's gaze. "Speak plainly, beast."

The dragon's wings shifted, its tail coiling behind it like a serpent waiting to strike.

"Mortal tongues twist the truth. You have no right to what you guard, yet you hide it beneath your temple of stone."

Tooth, still as a statue, muttered under his breath. "It knows about the stone."

The dragon's head snapped toward him, its teeth gleaming like polished blades.

"I know of all things, little one."

Frold stepped beside Zuba, his voice calm but firm. "You speak of the relic. The stone given to us by the dying knight."

The dragon growled low, the ground trembling beneath its claws.

"Given? No. Taken."

Uruk crossed his arms, his tusks bared in a defiant grin. "And if it was? We do not bow to monsters."

The dragon's golden eyes narrowed. Its nostrils flared, releasing a burst of heat that made the knights shift uncomfortably in their armor.

"You understand nothing."

It spoke again, but this time, in a tongue lost to all but the most ancient of scholars—a language that sounded like the breaking of mountains, the clash of titans, the whisper of forgotten storms.

"Zhakth'ir kahl'dran vashan velmorin..."

The words rattled in their chests, vibrating in the very air. Even those who had no understanding of the dragon's language felt the weight of its meaning.

Zuba's fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword. He did not like threats.

"What does the stone mean to you?"

The dragon exhaled, the heat rolling over them like the breath of a furnace.

"It is not meant for you."

Its tail lashed suddenly, striking a great stone statue beside the stairs, shattering it like glass. The impact sent dust and debris flying, knocking a few knights off their feet.

Then the dragon's voice deepened, becoming a promise of ruin.

"Give it to me... or this city will burn."

For a moment, silence hung heavy in the air. The knights remained unmoving, their hands resting on their weapons, their faces hard as the mountains.

Zuba was the first to speak.

"You come here, threatening fire and death. And you expect us to kneel?"

The dragon's wings flexed, stirring the air into a storm.

"I expect you to choose whether your people will die screaming or live in surrender."

Uruk took a step forward, fists clenched. "You think yourself a god, beast? We've slain men who thought the same."

The dragon's snarl rumbled through the city, the sky itself seeming to darken as storm clouds churned above.

"Men are nothing. I am the storm before the flood. The fire before the ruin. You have not yet seen what I can do."

Tooth's ears twitched, his tail flicking with irritation. "And yet, you talk instead of doing it. If you're so powerful, why demand the stone instead of taking it?"

The dragon's lips curled, revealing rows of razor-like fangs.

"Because the time of reckoning is not yet come. But it will. The stone belongs to me. You are merely the thieves who hold it before its return."

Zuba's eyes remained cold. "If you want it, you will have to rip it from our hands. And that is not easily done."

The dragon's golden eyes burned. Its claws dug into the stone of the citadel steps. Its wings spread wide, blocking out the sky.

"Then your people will scream."

With a powerful beat of its wings, the dragon lifted from the ground, the force nearly knocking the knights from their feet. The sky churned with its ascent, the city trembling beneath the weight of the beast's departure.

It rose high into the heavens, circling once before vanishing into the storm above.

For a long moment, silence.

Then, the people of Runecald whispered in fear.

Zuba turned to the others, his jaw clenched. "This is not over."

Frold's expression was grim. "We have made an enemy unlike any other."

Tooth ran his tongue over his sharp teeth, eyes flickering toward the sky. "Then we'd best get ready."

Uruk grinned. "Let it come. I look forward to showing it how hard men can fight."

Above them, the clouds churned, black and heavy with the promise of war.

The night was eerily still, a quiet that clung to the land like an omen. The torches along Runecald's walls flickered in the cold wind, and the city's streets were silent, save for the occasional murmur of knights patrolling in the moonlight.

Then, from the valley beyond the city walls, came the roar.

It was a sound that shattered the night like thunder cracking the heavens, deep and terrible, a voice of wrath that sent birds screaming from the rooftops and rattled the very stones of the city. The bells of Runecald rang out in alarm, their frantic chimes cutting through the silence.

A glow rose beyond the outer walls, first a flicker, then a rising inferno.

The dragon had returned.

By the time the Grandmasters reached the walls, the night sky was already ablaze. Beyond the city, the outer villages burned, fields of grain turned to blackened husks, the wooden beams of homes collapsing in showers of embers.

Flames rose high into the sky, choking the air with thick, suffocating smoke. The wretched screams of the dying filled the night—farmers, villagers, mothers clutching children as they ran through the streets in terror.

And above it all, the beast soared.

Its massive wings beat against the sky, sending waves of heat rolling over the city. The dragon's scales gleamed like molten steel, its golden eyes surveying the destruction below with something resembling amusement.

Then, it spoke, its voice a deep, echoing rumble that carried across the burning fields.

"Knights of Runecald... see what your defiance has wrought."

The Temple Knights did not hesitate.

Zuba moved first, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Archers! Ballista crews! Take your positions!" The men rushed to the walls, loading their massive siege weapons, their hands trembling as they aimed at the beast.

Uruk charged through the streets, his greatsword drawn, cutting through burning wreckage to reach the trapped villagers. He grabbed a child who had fallen, lifting them over his shoulder, before slamming his boot into a burning door, clearing the way for the family inside.

Tooth stood atop the city's outer wall, his hands gripping a great war spear, his fur already singed by the heat. His black eyes locked onto the dragon's form, waiting for the perfect moment.

Frold, alongside the monastery healers, moved between the wounded, his hands slick with blood and ash as he worked to tend the burned and broken. "Get them to the temple!" he shouted to the novices, "We hold the line here!"

The first volley of arrows loosed.

The sky darkened with iron-tipped shafts, whistling toward the beast. The ballista crews followed, launching massive bolts meant to pierce the hides of giants.

The dragon did not dodge.

It did not even move.

The arrows struck its blackened scales—and shattered, falling harmlessly to the earth. The ballista bolts, driven by steel and magic, cracked against its hide, but none pierced deep enough to wound.

The beast laughed.

A low, rumbling sound, like distant thunder.

"Fools," it said, its golden eyes gleaming with contempt. "Your weapons mean nothing. You could have given me the stone and lived."

Then, it moved.

The dragon swooped low, its enormous tail whipping through the air, smashing through an entire defensive line. The impact sent knights flying, armor crumpling like tin, their screams lost in the roar of the fire.

Tooth hurled his war spear, aiming for the dragon's exposed flank. The weapon flew true, but at the last moment, the beast shifted, and the spear merely glanced off its scales, spiraling uselessly into the flames below.

Then came the fire.

The dragon opened its jaws, and the world turned to flame.

A torrent of searing breath poured forth, engulfing an entire street in an inferno. The buildings stood for only a moment before collapsing, their wooden beams reduced to ash, their stone walls blackened and cracked from the heat.

The knights caught in the blast had no chance. Their screams were brief, their bodies reduced to blackened husks where they stood.

The flames roared, reaching even the outer walls.

Tooth, caught in the scorching heat, let out a pained cry as his fur ignited, the flames searing his skin. He stumbled back, desperately tearing at his burning cloak, before leaping off the battlements and into a fountain below, the water hissing as it smothered the flames.

Uruk, dragging a half-burned knight from the wreckage, looked up in rage. "Bastard—"

The dragon turned its gaze upon him.

"Next time," it rumbled, its wings spreading wide once more, "I will come for the heart of your city."

It beat its wings, rising into the sky, its massive form silhouetted against the burning villages below.

"Bring me the stone... or watch Runecald crumble."

And with that, the beast vanished into the night.

The fires raged until dawn, until the last embers were extinguished, leaving behind only ruin. The outer villages were gone, their people either dead, wounded, or displaced. Fields that had once fed the city were now blackened wastelands, and the walls of Runecald were scarred by heat and flame.

The knights gathered in the temple square, their armor singed, their expressions grim.

Frold wiped sweat from his brow, his hands still stained with the blood of the wounded. "This was not a battle. It was a warning."

Tooth, his fur still damp from the fountain, growled. "Then let's make sure it's the last warning it ever gives."

Uruk gritted his teeth. "We're going to kill that thing."

Zuba stood in silence, his black eyes fixed on the smoldering horizon.

For the first time in his life, he was unsure if that was even possible.

But one thing was certain. The dragon had declared war.

The Temple Knights had faced armies, assassins, and traitors, but nothing like this.

The dragon had promised wrath, and now, it came.

The night was heavy with smoke, the scent of burning wood and flesh already lingering in the air. The fields outside the city were still blackened from the beast's first attack, and now the people of Runecald lived in terror, knowing the worst was yet to come.

In the deepest chambers of the citadel, beneath thick stone and torchlight, the Grandmasters sat at a worn wooden table. The war room, once a place of strategy and conquest, had become a place of desperation.

Tooth scratched his clawed fingers against the surface, his ears twitching. "We don't have enough. Our ballistas barely scratched it. We need something else."

Zuba stood near the map table, his black eyes void of sleep. He was calculating, thinking, but there were no good answers. "We don't have anything else," he said at last. "We're fighting a god with iron and wood. That's not a battle. That's a massacre."

Frold dipped a quill into black ink, scrawling out a message onto parchment with quick, precise strokes.

"To Elric, Grandmaster of the Order—"

"Runecald is under siege. A dragon has come, demanding the relic stone. We refused. It burned the outer villages in warning. We are defenseless against this enemy. If you have knowledge, if you have strength to spare—send it. We may not last the night."

The raven was tied with a leather cord, loosed into the sky from a narrow shaft in the citadel. It vanished into the dark, carrying Runecald's final hope.

But hope was short-lived. A single horn blew from the city walls.

Then came the roar. And the sky turned to flame. The first thing the people saw was a shadow.

The moon vanished behind the colossal wings, the stars swallowed in a sudden, unnatural darkness. Then, the air heated, suffocating, as if the city itself had been dropped into the depths of a forge.

The dragon descended, and Runecald ignited.

Flames poured from the beast's jaws, rolling down the city streets like an unstoppable tide. The wooden beams of homes, markets, temples—all turned to instant infernos. People fled, screaming, but fire was faster than flesh.

A woman ran clutching her child, her cries lost in the crackling roar of the blaze. The fire caught her cloak first, then her hair, then her skin—and in seconds, she was nothing but cinders, crumbling into ash before she could even scream.

Men tried to run, but the heat alone cooked them where they stood, their armor turning red-hot against their skin. The city streets became a graveyard of blackened bones, skeletons frozen in twisted shapes, the last moments of their agony seared into the earth itself.

The dragon circled overhead, its golden eyes filled not with rage, but something worse—satisfaction.

It had given them a choice. They had chosen war. The Temple Knights fought.

From the walls, ballistae loosed massive bolts, their steel tips gleaming in the firelight as they soared toward the beast.

Some struck true, slamming into the dragon's hide with tremendous force—but the creature merely snarled, shaking them loose as if they were needles in a beast's fur.

Archers fired, arrows blackening as they passed through the waves of heat.

Swordsmen charged into burning streets, trying to cut down the beast's massive, talon-tipped feet.

It was useless.

The dragon swooped low, landing in the main square, its claws crushing a dozen men beneath its weight. The earth cracked beneath its feet, the stone melting in places where its breath touched.

It raised its head, breathed in deep— And released hell upon the temple itself.

The Cathedral of Saints had stood for centuries, an unyielding monument to gods and men alike. It had endured wars, sieges, kings rising and falling.

It did not endure dragonfire.

The flames tore through its grand stained-glass windows, bursting inside like a divine purge, setting the great wooden rafters ablaze. Statues of saints crumbled, their stone faces melting into formless ruin. The altar split in two, the once-sacred halls turned into a flaming ruin of death and screams.

Priests ran, robes aflame, some throwing themselves from the high balconies rather than face the fire.

The bells of the Temple Knights rang in warning—then melted, their iron twisting into unrecognizable shapes as they fell.

The dragon spoke, its voice booming through the dying city.

"You are weak. You will kneel, or you will be ash."

In the tunnels beneath Runecald, the Grandmasters watched their city die.

The heat seeped through the stone, sweat beading on their brows as they stood in silence.

Tooth's tail twitched, his eyes reflecting flickering orange light from above. "This is worse than a war," he muttered. "This is a massacre."

Uruk, arms crossed, his face grim, said nothing.

Frold stared at the dirt beneath his feet, his hands balled into fists. "We cannot stop this."

Zuba turned, facing them with unwavering certainty.

"We will."

Tooth scoffed, gesturing toward the burning ceiling. "With what, Zuba? Steel doesn't work. Arrows don't work. Ballistas barely make it blink. You saw what it did. It didn't even fight. It just... destroyed."

For a moment, Zuba said nothing. Then he looked at the small leather pouch tied at his belt. The relic stone. The thing the dragon had come for.

He turned to the others. "If we can't kill it, then we find out why it wants this."

Frold frowned. "You're suggesting we study it now? In the middle of a burning city?"

Zuba's black eyes burned with something deeper than desperation—determination.

"If we don't, there won't be a city left to save."

Uruk let out a slow breath. "Then we'd better move fast."

The ground shook, dust trickling from the ceiling as another roar shattered the night above them. Runecald was burning. And the Temple Knights had one last chance to save it—or watch it fall into ruin forever. A week of terror. A week of fire.

Runecald had become a city of ruin, ash, and whispers of doom. The dragon had not simply destroyed—it toyed with them, circling the city like a great bird of prey, its massive wings blotting out the sun, casting its shadow over the streets. It would vanish into the mountains, then return with a roar that shook the heavens, sweeping low over the buildings, unleashing torrents of flame.

The people had stopped praying. They had stopped believing.

Every day, bodies were pulled from the blackened rubble. Every night, the beast's glowing eyes were seen in the distance, waiting, watching. The dragon had made the city its plaything, toying with it like a cat playing with a wounded mouse.

The Temple Knights hid in the tunnels, their pride buried beneath the ruins of their own city. But they had not given up.

Deep beneath the streets, in the forgotten halls of the old city library, the Grandmasters searched for answers.

Torches flickered along the cold stone walls, casting eerie shadows as the Grandmasters poured over old tomes, searching for anything that could tell them what the dragon truly wanted.

Frold ran his fingers across ancient parchment, whispering beneath his breath. "It must be here... something, anything..."

Tooth crouched on the edge of a collapsed bookshelf, scanning the faded ink.

Zuba's black eyes narrowed as he pulled an ancient leather-bound book from the shelf. He wiped the dust from the cover, revealing the faded inscription.

"The Forged Fire of the Seven Kings."

Silence fell as Zuba opened the brittle pages, his voice steady as he read aloud.

"Long ago, before the fall of the Seven Kings, there was a stone—not born of men, nor of gods, but of fire and magic. It was forged in the flames of the great dragons, a relic of the first age, meant to hold power beyond measure. But it was lost for centuries, hidden from those who would seek it. And in its absence, the dragons turned to slumber, waiting for the time of return."

Frold exhaled slowly. "It was forged by dragons."

Uruk scowled. "Then why does it want it back now?"

Tooth's tail flicked. "Because we have it."

Then the horns blew. The dragon had returned.

The sky above Runecald shattered with fire as the beast descended once more, its massive wings throwing gales of wind through the ruins. Ballista crews scrambled into position, soldiers rushed to the walls, their faces pale with fear but determined to make a stand.

The Temple Knights rode out, their shields raised, lances braced. The archers let loose a volley of iron-tipped arrows, the ballistas fired their monstrous bolts.

It did nothing.

The dragon's laughter rumbled through the city, a mocking sound that vibrated in the bones of every man and woman who heard it.

"You fight with iron and wood," it sneered. "And you expect to wound me?"

It swooped low, its massive talons crushing men beneath its feet, its tail sweeping through entire formations of knights, sending bodies tumbling through the air. It opened its jaws—

And the streets of Runecald became hellfire. Buildings collapsed, men screamed as their armor melted against their skin, horses bolted in terror, their riders burning in their saddles. It was over.

Then, from the eastern gate, came the sound of thunder. A new horn. A battle cry. And a warrior clad in gold and white.

Elric rode through the flames, his cloak billowing behind him, his armor untouched by the inferno. And in his hand, he carried a sword that burned with a light unlike anything seen before.

The same sword the Grandmasters had empowered in the mountain monastery.

He charged into battle, his warhorse black as night, its hooves kicking up sparks against the shattered stone.

The dragon turned, its golden eyes narrowing as it sensed something new. Something dangerous. Elric did not slow. He raised his sword high, the glowing blade pulsing with a holy radiance, and he struck.

The blade tore through the dragon's side, slicing into its stomach, carving through the scales that no other weapon had been able to penetrate.

The beast screamed. A cry of pain, not of fury. The first wound it had suffered. The Temple Knights roared in unison, their courage restored.

Uruk bellowed, swinging his greatsword, hacking into the dragon's leg. Zuba slashed at its talons, moving with deadly precision. Tooth leapt onto its tail, climbing, his daggers cutting deep into the flesh beneath its scales.

Frold pierced his spear into the beast's ankle, anchoring it, slowing it down.

But it was Elric alone who could truly harm it.

The dragon lashed out, biting down, ripping a knight in half, its talons crushing another soldier into pulp. Blood painted the streets, but Elric did not hesitate.

He moved like the wrath of the gods, his sword carving deep gashes into the dragon's hide.

Another strike—its leg was crippled.

Another—its wing, torn, unable to lift it. The beast stumbled, its body shaking, its great wings flailing but finding no air. For the first time, it felt pain. For the first time, it knew fear.

It screamed. The ground trembled. Elric raised his sword one final time. And he plunged it into the dragon's eye.

There was a great flash, a burst of white light, so blinding that even the sun seemed dim in comparison. The blade pierced deep into the dragon's skull, straight into its mind.

The dragon let out one last, soul-shattering cry, its body shaking violently as its enormous form collapsed. The flames in its throat died. Its massive head struck the earth, its golden eyes dimming, its body twitching as the last of its strength bled away. Then—silence.

A city that had burned for a week straight, a city that had echoed with the screams of the dying, a city that had known only terror, finally fell into silence.

The dragon was dead. And Runecald still stood.

As the smoke cleared, as the people emerged from their hiding places, they beheld their savior. Elric, standing atop the beast's lifeless corpse, his sword still buried in its skull.

A cheer rose through the broken city—a roar of triumph, of relief, of victory. The Temple Knights had not fallen. The dragon had not won.

The morning after the dragon's death was unlike any other.

For the first time in weeks, the sky was clear—no shadows circling above, no oppressive heat clinging to the city like a shroud. The smoke that had choked the streets had begun to drift away, carried off by the cold mountain winds.

Slowly, the people emerged.

At first, it was only a few, stepping cautiously from the underground tunnels, their faces streaked with ash, their eyes sunken from sleepless nights of terror. But then, as the news spread like wildfire, the survivors flooded into the open streets, their voices rising in a mixture of relief and grief.

Mothers held their children, tears streaming down their faces, overwhelmed that they had lived to see another day. Men clasped hands, weeping silently for those who had not made it. The warriors, the blacksmiths, the farmers—all looked upon the dragon's massive corpse, sprawled across the city square, and knew that they had survived.

The Temple Knights stood among them, their armor battered and scorched, their weapons dulled from the brutal battle. But they stood tall. The nightmare was over.

And now, they had to rebuild.

The Grandmasters gathered in the war room, seated around the great stone table that had once been the place of battle strategies and desperate planning. Now, it held only one object of focus—the sword that had slain the dragon.

It still glowed faintly, its blade etched with runes that pulsed with a slow, rhythmic light, as if it were alive.

Zuba, his fingers running along the hilt, exhaled. "This truly is a powerful relic." He met Elric's gaze. "A Dragon Slayer."

Elric nodded, his expression calm yet resolute. "The magic stone we recovered carries the power of dragon magic itself. It was forged in the ancient times of the Seven Kings, long

before this city, before the wars of men. One weapon alone can be empowered with it, turning steel into something divine, but the stone can also be used for things of less magic afterwards. This blade is now more than mere metal—it is a weapon of legend."

The room fell silent as the words settled upon them.

The sword had saved the city.

And now, it had become one of the holiest relics of the Temple Knights.

Frold, ever the scholar, leaned forward. "If the stone holds such power... can it be used again? Could we forge more weapons like this?"

Elric shook his head. "The stone's gift is not limitless. It has given its blessing once, and the blade before us is the result. This relic—this Dragon Slayer—is unique. It must be protected. And I trust none more than you four to wield and safeguard it."

Uruk, his tusked grin returning, clapped a heavy hand against Zuba's back. "A relic for our Order, then. And a blade meant for war. I like it."

Tooth, his black eyes flicking between the sword and the stone resting in Elric's hands, tapped his claws against the table. "And the stone?"

Elric stood, gripping the relic tightly. "I will take it back to the mountain monastery. It belongs in the hands of the Order, where it will be kept safe."

A heavy silence followed. Zuba sheathed the Dragon Slayer, standing to meet Elric's gaze. "Then we will hold it."

Elric nodded. Without another word, he turned, walking out of the war room, the magic stone secured in his cloak. And the Temple Order's holy relics were born. The city was in ruin.

Entire streets were nothing but charred husks, their wooden beams collapsed into piles of blackened ash. The walls of the citadel bore deep cracks where the dragon's tail had struck. The great Cathedral of Saints, once a place of prayer and strength, now lay in partial ruin, its roof caved in, its great bell melted by dragon fire.

But the people of Runecald were strong. The Temple Knights gave the order—the city would be rebuilt.

Men were sent to the forests, chopping great pines to rebuild homes, bringing back lumber by the wagonloads. Masons worked day and night, stacking stone to reinforce the crumbling walls. The blacksmiths' forges roared with renewed life, producing tools, nails, and armor to replace what was lost.

Frold oversaw the reconstruction of the cathedral, directing the placement of massive stone blocks, ensuring that the new foundations would be stronger than before. "The Order is not merely swords and war," he reminded the builders. "It is faith, knowledge, and endurance. This city will not just be rebuilt—it will rise greater than it was before."

Uruk led the restoration of the outer walls, rallying the remaining warriors and laborers. "Stronger than before! Higher than before! If another beast comes knocking, we break its skull before it reaches the gates!" His booming laughter filled the air, lifting the spirits of the men.

Tooth, ever the opportunist, ensured that the city's underground tunnels were reinforced, securing hidden supplies of grain, water, and weapons in case another disaster struck. "You never know when you'll need a second way out," he muttered, chewing on a metal pin.

Zuba personally saw to the training of new warriors. The knights who had fallen would be honored, but their loss would not weaken the Order. New recruits were brought in, trained rigorously, ensuring that the next time battle came to Runecald, they would not be caught unprepared.

Day by day, the ruins became streets again. Week by week, the scars of battle faded. And in months, Runecald stood once more. The people, who had once cowered in tunnels, now walked proudly in their restored city.

The Temple Knights, no longer broken warriors hiding in shadow, now stood as true rulers, protectors of their people. And at the heart of it all, in the Temple of the Black Hand, hung the Dragon Slayer.

A symbol. A warning. And a promise.

That should any enemy, mortal or beast, dare to strike against the Temple Order again—They would be met with steel, fire, and the wrath of those who refused to kneel.

Runecald had endured the storm, and as the days passed into weeks, then into months, life returned to normal.

The streets that had once been filled with ash and ruin were now bustling with merchants, craftsmen, and common folk once more. The scars of war had been covered by fresh stone, new timber, and the unwavering spirit of the people.

The Grandmasters ruled the city not as kings, but as guardians, ensuring that justice, discipline, and faith remained the foundation of their rule. The days of tyranny under the old monarchy had ended, and now, Runecald stood as a beacon of strength and honor, a city reborn in fire and steel.

From the Citadel of the Black Hand, the party governed with a steady hand and unwavering principles.

Zuba presided over the city's councils, ensuring that laws were enforced fairly and that the voice of the people was not lost.

Uruk trained the city's warriors, ensuring that the knights remained strong and disciplined, that the mistakes of the past would not be repeated. His voice could often be heard booming across the training grounds, pushing new recruits to their limits.

Frold oversaw the libraries and temples, ensuring that knowledge, faith, and wisdom remained pillars of the Order. Scholars from all corners of the land were welcomed into the city, their minds put to work in the great halls of learning.



Tooth managed the supply lines, the forges, and the hidden defenses beneath the city. He ensured that Runecald's wealth was not squandered, that its defenses remained strong, and that every weapon, every piece of armor, every grain of wheat was accounted for.

Together, they ruled justly and wisely, not as lords of power, but as protectors of the people.

With Runecald secured, the next step was clear—the Temple Order had to grow.

Messengers were sent across the realm, bearing the sigil of the Black Hand and Sword. Their mission was simple:

To spread the teachings of the Temple Knights. To build monasteries in the distant lands. To train warriors in the ways of discipline, faith, and steel.

Some lands welcomed them, eager for the protection and order they offered. Monasteries rose from the earth, their banners flying high, their warriors sharpening their blades in preparation for whatever the world would throw at them.

Other lands resisted, clinging to their old ways, fearing what the Temple Order represented. But the knights were patient. They would not force their faith or their way of life upon those who did not yet understand it. They would wait, and when the time was right, they would bring their wisdom and steel to all who sought it.

The Order was no longer confined to a single city. It was spreading. It was growing. It was becoming something greater than any of them had ever imagined.

One evening, as the sun set over the mountains, casting its golden light upon the city, the Grandmasters stood upon the balcony of the Citadel, watching as the people moved through the streets below.

The city was alive.

The bells of the temple rang, signaling the end of another day, the start of another night.

Uruk crossed his arms, watching the fires in the forges below. "We built this from nothing." He grinned. "And now, look at it."

Frold nodded, his voice softer. "We have done what we set out to do. The Order is strong. The city is strong. And the people believe in it."

Tooth smiled. "And no one is stealing from the treasury anymore."

Zuba exhaled, his black eyes fixed upon the horizon. "This is just the beginning," he murmured. "We are no longer a single monastery, no longer a small band of warriors in the dark. The Order is everywhere. It will outlive all of us."

The wind carried the banners high, the sigil of the Black Hand and Sword waving proudly over the city they had saved.

The Temple Knights had carved their place into history.